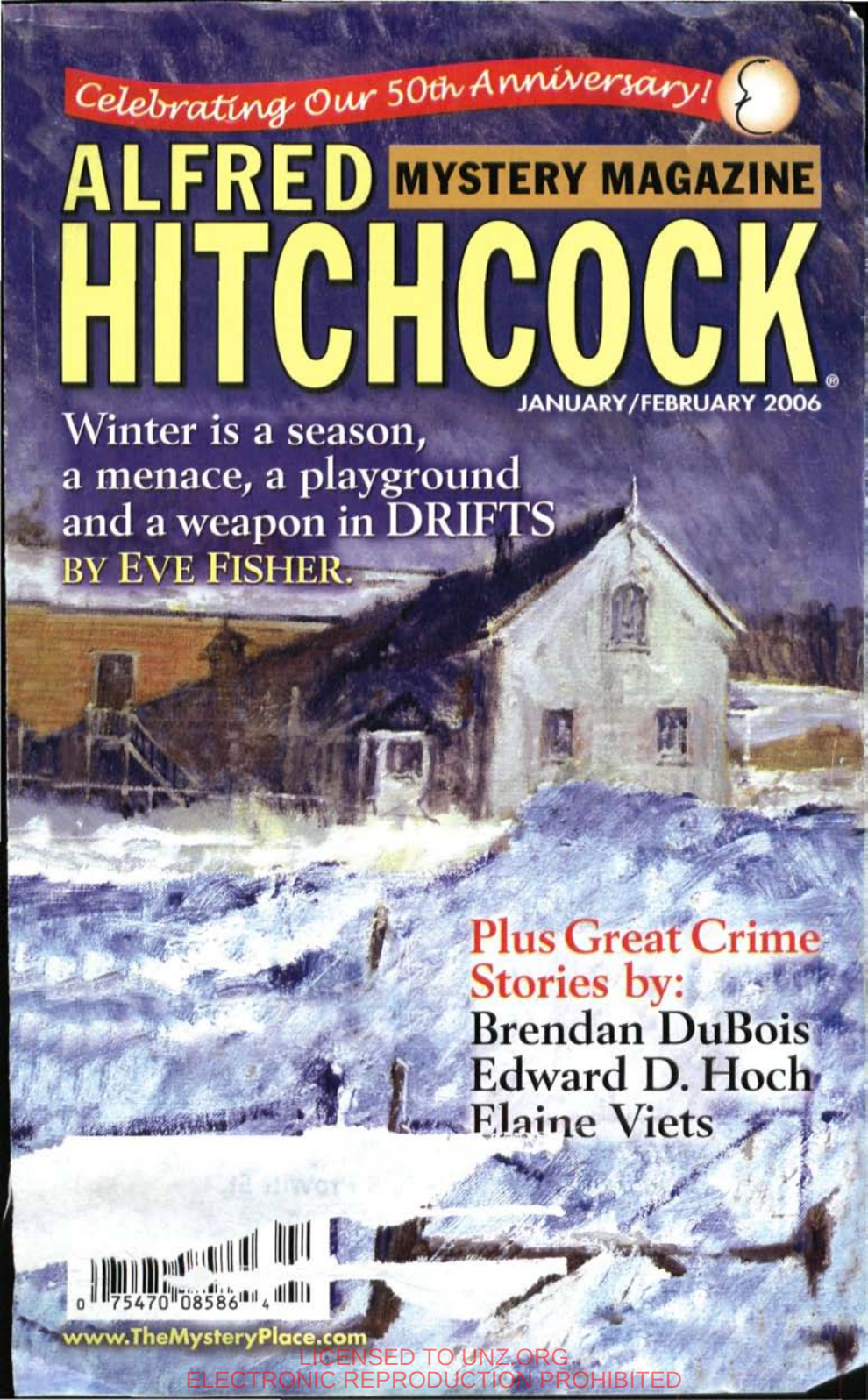
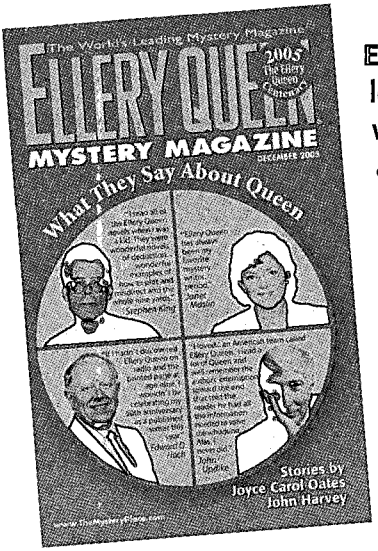


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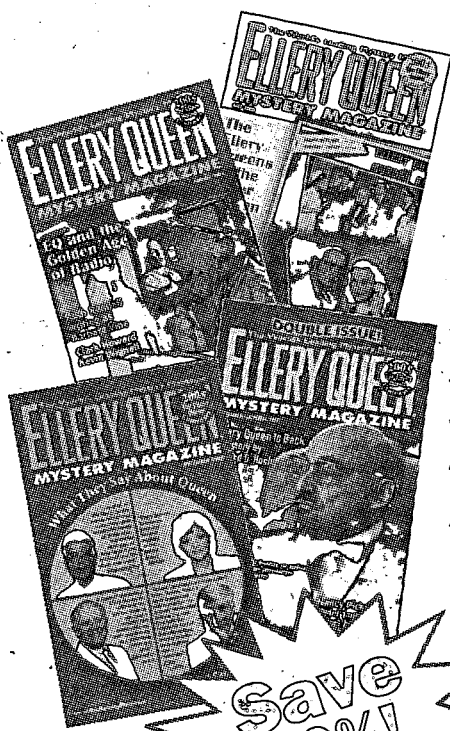
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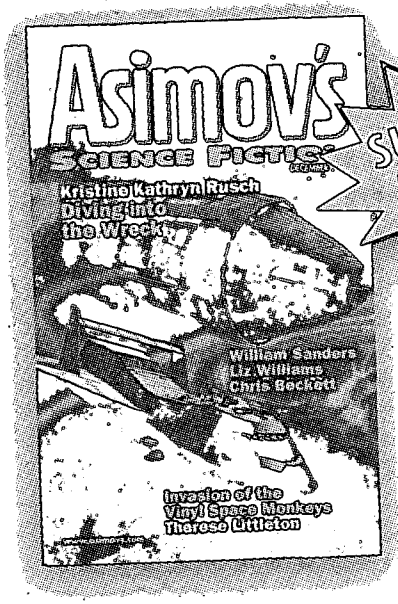
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Season's Greetings

FROM THE STAFF OF AHMM



Linda Weatherly

This year we are celebrating a successful (and terrific) fifty-year publishing run. Although the magazine's first issue was published in December of 1956, we are taking the whole year of 2006 to showcase some of the finest mystery stories that came out of the magazine. This first issue reprints DeLoris Stanton's Forbes's 1957 story "Just Watching." We think it is as ever biting today as it was when it was first published.

—The Editors

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A Tale of Too Much Dickens

JAMES POWELL

It was the best of *The New York Times*. It was the worst of *The New York Times*. First Mel Gibbie read of the brutal murder of his associate Lamar Hooper. This he considered the "best" part, for performing Charles Dickens's "A Christmas Carol" over the holidays had become a very crowded field. The "worst" came in the newspaper's Arts and Entertainment section. Hollywood's big animated movie this season was going to be *SpongeBob Cratchit's A SquarePants Christmas*. Gibbie already knew Ice-Stravaganza productions planned touring companies of *Cheapskates on Skates: the Ebenezer Scrooge Story*. And last night, though it was still only November, the *Late Show with David Letterman* featured Fast Freddy Farmer with the big clock ticking in his two minute version of the Dickens classic, a lickety-split slurry of words punctuated with every "Bah Humbug!" and Tiny Tim's "God bless us every one" jockeyed around to the end for the big finale.

Gibbie uttered a groan worthy of Jacob Marley's ghost. Soon, he feared, the world would tire of "A Christmas Carol," meaning a world tired of Mel Gibbie. He threw the newspaper aside, rose, and stood in front of the gas logs burning in his modest fireplace. Lined up on the mantel were the hand puppets he used in his telling of the story. Since the death of his mother these puppets, the Cratchits in particular, had become his family. He'd told them many times that he only endured his hectic holiday schedule of one-night stands and matinees to keep food on the table and a roof over their heads. Now he told them again.

Then Gibbie got an idea. He and Hooper belonged to the Carolers Club, as the Dickens-doers called themselves. Suppose the murderer was a Caroler too, someone trying to whittle down the competition? (Gibbie was surprised he hadn't thought of doing that himself. Not that he could ever commit murder. Why?

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Tim Foley

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The naked hand puppet of self-reproach knew why. "Because you're a gutless wonder, Gibbie," it whispered in his ear.)

Well, gutless wonder or not, maybe Gibbie could do a little whittling too. If a Caroler killed Hooper and Gibbie figured out who, he could tip off the police. That'd be one more competitor out of the way. He sat back down and opened the newspaper.

Hooper had been a Dickens imitator, one of the crowd who wore Victorian outfits and laid on a bit of an English accent for the job. His booking agent came by his shabby Woodside apartment in Queens after Hooper missed a scheduled reading in Stamford the night before. He found his client's door ajar and the man on the floor bludgeoned to death with the ivory-headed walking stick he used in his act. The cane had a battery-powered light in the head for flagging down taxis. Hooper'd put in a green bulb, and when he did Marley's ghost or the various spirits of Christmas, he'd hold the head of the cane under his chin and snap on the light to great effect.

Gibbie read the newspaper account of the murder. When he got to the part about the police finding a star made of folded paper at the crime scene he smiled. "Not a star," he told himself, "a snowflake." Now he had his man. Bolton Sharpe, a new kid on the Dickens-doers block, carried a colorful stack of origami paper to the podium. As he recited the story, he folded the paper into various props: Scrooge's nightcap, Marley's chains and moneyboxes, and of course, Tiny Tim's crutch. Sharpe's encore was a dazzling display of high-speed origami folding. Reciting the thirty words the Inuit have for snow, he made a snowflake for each, no two alike, and threw them out into the audience. By season's end his fingers were thick with adhesive bandages, for paper cuts were a hazard of his business.

As Gibbie reached for the phone to call the police there was a knock on his door. The man standing in the hall displayed a badge. "Mr. Gibbie," he said, "I'm Lieutenant Mason. I've some questions regarding the murder of Lamar Hooper. May I come in?"

Gibbie stepped back in surprise and gestured the man inside.

"I understand you knew the victim," said Mason.

"So did Bolton Sharpe," blurted Gibbie.

The detective raised an eyebrow.

The puppeteer quickly explained, "That paper star at the crime scene was an origami snowflake from Sharpe's act."

"We know," nodded Mason. "It had his name written on it. So we looked him up. Now Forensics tells us Hooper was murdered yesterday evening between six and seven. At that time Mr. Sharpe was entertaining the kids at Children's Hospital. A freebie. A real

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nice guy, Mr. Sharpe. Real generous with his time. He told us sometimes the audience brought up snowflakes afterwards for him to autograph. Said maybe somebody was out to frame him for Hooper's murder. And, oh, he mentioned seeing you at one of his performances last year."

"Just checking out the competition."

Mason worked his eyebrow again. "Mr. Gibbie, can you tell me where you were yesterday evening between six and seven?"

Blushing, Gibbie jerked his head toward the puppets on the mantel and begged in a whisper, "Can we keep it down? All right, so I was doing a bachelor party. 'A Christmas with Kinky Carol.' "

"Obscene hand puppets?" asked Mason in a disapproving whisper.

"Look," pleaded Gibbie under his breath, "last month when Billy Napier took a swan dive out his apartment window, Sammy, my booking agent, said if I bought Billy's stuff from his old lady he'd find me work. Work I need. So I did. I gave the act a try. But it wasn't up my alley. I didn't have Billy's dirty little laugh. So I told Sammy to count me out. He wasn't happy about that. I only did yesterday's gig because Sammy'd already booked it." Gibbie got his appointment calendar and showed it to Mason.

"Okay," said the policeman, "so while we're at it, what were you doing on October 11 around eight P.M.?" When Gibbie looked puzzled, Mason explained, "Hooper's murder has us reconsidering some other cases. We suspect Napier's swan dive might have had an assist."

Gibbie thumbed back through the calendar until he found the date. "Okay, here we are. I was trying out this Halloween act. Washington Irving's 'The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.' I'm the Headless Horseman with a coat up over my head. I use this jack-o'-lantern under my arm to narrate the thing. My Bob Cratchit does Ichabod Crane with putty to make his nose long and snipey, and Mrs. Cratchit is plumped out and rouged up to play Katrina Van Tassel."

Mason looked skeptical.

"So I've got some bugs to work out," admitted Gibbie.

Mason moved on. "Ever meet Roy Reilly who disappeared last year?"

"The balloon guy? Sure. We Dickens-doers are a tight-knit group. The Carolers Club, that's what we call ourselves. Come January when the season's over we rent a hall and throw ourselves a shindig. 'Eeffoc Moor,' that's our battle cry."

" 'Eeffoc Moor?' " Mason raised both eyebrows suspiciously.

"Look," said Gibbie, "young Charles Dickens used to hang out at

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this London restaurant where one of the doors had an oval glass in it that said 'Coffee Room.' Dickens wrote that from the inside it read 'Moor Eeffoc.' You might say it's the Carolers Club's 'inside' joke. Get it?" Mason looked like he didn't. "Me," continued Gibbie, "I always thought Dickens's Eeffoc Moor would be one great place to live. I get tired of the city sometimes. You know what I mean? There are days when I could use a whole plateful of sky."

Mason was losing interest.

"Okay, sure, I knew Reilly," said Gibbie again. "Hey, you try reading Dickens and shaping those sausage balloons at the same time. You can bet the squeaking rubber set a lot of teeth on edge. Reilly's Ghost of Christmas Past wasn't bad and his Marley door-knocker was great. So what's with Reilly?"

"We've found his remains," said Mason. "Could somebody be trying to kill you people off? Maybe there's a murderer stalking this Eeffoc Moor of yours."

"Hooper, Napier, Reilly," counted Gibbie. "Boy, wouldn't that be something? Maybe I'll have to pick up and move to Swen, Vermont."

When Mason blinked Gibbie explained, "There was another wonderful moor, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show.* Remember? She worked for this TV news department, right? From the outside the glass door read TV NEWS. From inside it said SWEN, Vermont, which I always thought must be a very nice place to live too."

Mason looked at Gibbie for a long moment before handing him his card. "Give me a call if anything else comes to mind," he said, adding, "anything connected to our murder investigation."

On a free afternoon a couple of days later Gibbie decided to have a fireside chat, as he called his family meetings with the puppets on the mantel. Admitting how threadbare the costumes his mother had made for them had become, Gibbie said he hoped this year he'd get far enough ahead to have new ones made. Using their many voices, he staged a discussion where they talked about what kind of new costumes they'd like. Then, as always, he closed the meeting by picking up Tiny Tim by his head and having him utter his blessing.

Later that same day Sammy called. He'd arranged a trip to Atlantic City for six of the dozen workhorses on his Dickens list to do their stuff at six casinos. Gibbie hadn't been included, being in Sammy's bad books since the Kinky Carol business. But Grayson Reed, one of the chosen, had chickened out, spooked by

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Lamar Hooper's murder. The gig was Gibbie's if he got over to Sammy's apartment building chop-chop. Sammy warned him he wasn't going to wait around.

There wasn't much time. After a quick shower, Gibbie swept his hand puppets into a shopping bag with a collective "break a leg" for good luck and headed crosstown. The security man in the lobby knew him and pointed to the door to the underground garage. Gibbie hurried down, reaching the foot of the stairs in time to see Sammy's SUV roll up the ramp to the street. He didn't run after it. Sammy wasn't going to stop. Gibbie stepped out of the light. He didn't even want to give Sammy the satisfaction of seeing him standing there in his rearview mirror.

As Gibbie hugged his shopping bag in the shadows, he saw a strange shape on the cement floor in the SUV's parking space. Now it sat up, then stood, a man in overalls. Though his hair and beard had turned quite gray, Gibbie recognized Bosley Heck, one of the founders of the Carolers Club.

Heck, a man obsessed with Dickens, worked for ten months of the year every year at a variety of jobs—auto mechanic, locksmith, electrician. But come November he put everything aside, spread on his English accent, got into his Dickens outfit, and read "A Christmas Carol" until the holidays' very last gasp.

The Carolers jokingly called Heck The Dickens, for the man was a purist whose every word, bit of theatrical business, and detail of his costume down to the cashmere-checked pantaloons he wore and the two small roses, one white, one red, in his buttonhole, he could document from contemporary accounts and photographs of the author.

Gibbie watched as Heck picked up the creeper he'd been lying on and went up the ramp to wait by the garage door, intending, Gibbie was sure, to slip out as he'd slipped in with the next arriving or departing car.

Gibbie hurried back up the stairs and gave a shake of his head to the security man. Out on the street he heard the mild drum roll of the garage door as a car entered. Now ahead of him on the sidewalk he saw a figure carrying a creeper. Gibbie followed after him.

Bosley Heck had been a towering presence in the business when Gibbie was starting out. The man regarded his rival Dickens impersonators with a courtly, if wary eye, as an old dog might view a pack of romping puppies. When the puppeteer introduced himself and described his act, Heck had welcomed him with a gracious "The more the merrier." But Gibbie suspected Heck regarded acts like his own with contempt.

Some say Heck's descent into madness coincided with Vera

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Vail's off-Broadway success in *Desperate Housewife, the Mrs. Bob Cratchit Monologues,* a strident feminist retelling of the Dickens story. Others blame the arrival in New York of Cornelius O'Kelly, the Dublin Nightingale, and his *Christmas at the O'Carrolls,* an evening of Irish readings, clog dancing, and song where he accompanied himself on the electronic keyboard. (His "O Tiny Tim, the pipes, the pipes are calling" left no dry eye in the house. His "The Irish Heavyweight's Promise," where a pug-ugly swears in a letter to his referee father, "I'll be home for Christmas. You can count on me," was no less memorable.)

However Heck's madness began, he came to believe he was, in fact, Charles Dickens besieged all about by impostors and upstarts bent on turning his Christmas classic into a three-ring circus. His behavior became increasingly erratic until one night during a reading Heck got stuck on the first "Bah! humbug." He couldn't get beyond "Bah," repeating it again and again until the audience started shouting it back at him. Finally someone came out from behind the curtain and led a "bahing" and bewildered Heck offstage.

The man had ended up in a mental institution. Gibbie could imagine how he'd gotten back onto the street. Recently with medical costs rising, the state started returning non-violent inmates into the community, counting on improved drugs and local facilities to care for them.

Gibbie followed Heck down an alley alongside one of the few remaining Mexican restaurants on the Bowery. The man hid his creeper among the garbage cans and went in the back door. Through a window Gibbie watched him punch a time clock and take his place at a large dishwashing machine.

Gibbie went home. Tomorrow he would call Lieutenant Mason, mention missing his ride to Atlantic City, and say he saw Bosley Heck on the street outside Sammy's apartment building carrying a creeper. He'd tell Mason he only put two and two together when he read in the morning paper about Sammy's terrible accident.

As far as Gibbie was concerned, the booking agent would be no great loss. A man who called his dozen Dickens workhorses "The Twelve Drays of Christmas" certainly deserved to die. As for the other five in the vehicle, Gibbie told himself he'd had no actual hand in the accident. Whittle, whittle.

Later that afternoon, when Sammy's SUV careened off the highway to explode in a ball of fire, Lieutenant Mason suspected more Carolers Club foul play. He hurried to the booking agent's widow. When he learned that Grayson Reed, a Dickens imitator known for his wardrobe of fancy vests, had been slated for the

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Atlantic City trip but canceled at the last minute, Mason thought he had his man.

Grayson Reed had just heard on TV about the accident and his own close brush with death. He was cowering in a dark corner of his apartment when Mason arrived with two uniformed officers. Mason knocked. Then he identified himself and knocked again before ordering his men to break down the door. Reed panicked and tried to flee down the fire escape. At the open window Mason called for him to stop. When Reed did not, Mason shot him as he clattered down the iron steps.

Gibbie set the newspaper aside the next morning, unsure what to do. Clearly Mason thought he'd killed the Carolers Club murderer. And maybe he had. The police lieutenant was a professional, after all. Maybe there was some innocent explanation for why Heck was under the SUV. Maybe Sammy had hired him to fix something. Gibbie saw no need to rush into things. If the killings stopped, then Mason was right. Gibbie nodded to himself, pleased with his logic.

Besides he now had his hands full working night and day to help the Widow Sammy fill the gigs her late husband had booked. More work meant more money. Now Gibbie's fireside chats turned to talk of getting medical help for Tiny Tim, finding good women's colleges for Belinda and Martha Cratchit, and getting Master Peter into West Point.

A week later, Fast Freddy Farmer was pushed from a subway platform in front of an express train, and the story started going around that someone was trying to kill off the Carolers Club. Gibbie knew that someone as Heck. But he was willing to take his chances now. Overnight the crowds picked up, meaning more money, since the performers got a cut of the gate.

Those who came hoping to see a murder right before their eyes were not disappointed. First Cornelius O'Kelly, the Dublin Nightingale, was electrified by a loose connection as he plugged in the amplifier at the start of his act. He did a smart little Irish jig before falling backwards off the stage, dead as a doornail. Then Vera Vail, Mrs. Bob Cratchit, paused in mid monologue to take a sip of water and slumped over dead. (The police had checked the carafe on the dais for poison but not the rim of the glass she drank from.)

With the Carolers Club members dropping like flies around him, Gibbie suddenly felt himself alive and exhilarated. The immense game of Russian roulette he was playing with Heck was the most exciting thing he had ever done. Even when Bolton

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Sharpe died onstage in a blizzard of Inuit words and paper snowflakes—the police discovered edges of the snowflake origami paper had been dipped in curare—Gibbie soldiered on. "Who's the gutless wonder now?" he asked the naked hand puppet of self-reproach, but received no reply.

The Carolers Club murders, the hot news item that Christmas, got Gibbie an invitation to appear on the *Late Show with David Letterman*. The program began with a film clip shot in Gibbie's apartment with the non-Cratchit puppets lined up on the mantel. Gibbie introduced them and had Scrooge, Marley's ghost, the ghosts of the three Christmases, and Scrooge's Cousin Fred wish Letterman a merry, merry Christmas in their various voices.

After the film clip the puppeteer joined his host in front of the cameras. He wore Tiny Tim on his right hand and Bob Cratchit on his left, with the rest of the family peeking from his jacket pockets. He and the puppets sported black armbands all round. Gibbie delivered a brief eulogy to the Carolers Club dead and ended with the club's battle cry of "Eeffoc Moor." Then, sitting down with Letterman, he explained about Dickens's coffee room. When he segued into Mary Tyler Moore's Swen, Vermont, the studio audience went "Aww!" Then Tiny Tim gave his blessing and the studio audience went "Aww!" again. Letterman asked him to come back next Christmas.

The following day Gibbie got a phone call about his ad in the Carolers Club newsletter offering Billy Napier's Kinky Carol puppets for sale. He didn't recognize the voice. But the person was prepared to pay Gibbie's price if the goods were as filthy as specified. They agreed to meet at the bus terminal where Gibbie kept Napier's stuff in a locker. (He'd never for a moment considered bringing it back to the apartment with his puppet family.) Gibbie waited for an hour before remembering he'd never heard Bosley Heck's voice plain, without the laid-on English accent.

He hurried back to his apartment, whose atmosphere now had an alien charge to it. Had Heck been there? Gibbie crossed to the mantel. Was his puppet family cowering? Had Heck dared to threaten them? Well, Gibbie would put a quick stop to that. He telephoned Mason. He said he'd just seen Bosley Heck, a ghost from the Carolers Club's past, washing dishes in a Mexican restaurant in the Bowery. Mason understood and thanked Gibbie for the information.

Hanging up, Gibbie called a fireside chat. "That was Lieutenant Mason I was talking to. You remember him, right?" He made the puppet voices assure him they did. "Well, you're all safe now. Mr.

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Heck'll never threaten you again. I see now I shouldn't have stood by and let him murder everybody like that. Well, none of us is perfect, right? Remember, you're my family. I did it all for you."

Time for Tiny Tim's blessing. But when Gibbie reached for the puppet it recoiled as if from his touch. It moved. It was alive. Gibbie turned white. No! A live Tiny Tim could just as well say, "God bless us every one, except you, Mel Gibbie, you bastard!" Gibbie had to get control of his world again. With a curse he jammed his hand inside the puppet.

Heck surrendered peacefully when the police arrested him at the Mexican restaurant. The man confessed to his crimes, insisting the murders were a far, far better thing than he had ever done. He would spend the rest of his life in an asylum for the criminally insane.

Mason came round to tell Gibbie the news. When the puppeteer didn't answer his knock he grew concerned and hunted up the super. Let into the apartment, Mason found Gibbie dead, face down on the floor before the fireplace. He was wearing Tiny Tim, now grown immense, for Gibbie's hand had swollen up so large it split the puppet down the back.

When Forensics told him of the six-inch Mexican scorpion they found inside the hand puppet, Mason recalled that the restaurant where Heck washed dishes had once been raided on a tip they were holding cockfights in the basement. Instead, the police discovered a room where shouting bettors crowded around a tabletop arena or stood on chairs in back with rented binoculars to watch pair after pair of virulent scorpions fight to the death.

HOW TO SOLVE AN ACROSTIC

Using the definitions, fill in as many words as you can in the column on the right. Then transfer the letters from the column to their corresponding places in the diagram. A black square in the diagram indicates the end of a word. When completed, the diagram will yield a mystery-themed quotation. The initial letters of the words in the righthand column spell out the name of the author and the work from which the quote was taken.

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FALLEN

JOAN DRUETT

It all began when the second mate dropped dead.

Two hours earlier, the lookout's sharp eyes had glimpsed a pod of whales just after the sun had risen, though the light was glittering blindingly on the surface of the mid-Atlantic sea. "There blows!" he'd howled, and the decks of the small and elderly Nantucket whaleship *Paths of Duty* came alive with excitement. Captain Smith raced to the highest part of the mainmast, took a long look through his spyglass, and then came racing down again, bawling orders for the four whaleboats to be lowered.

Wiki Coffin, who belonged to the second mate's boat, went to the waist deck, where that particular whaleboat hung in the davits, and within seconds was joined by the other three oarsmen of the second mate's boat's crew. With no more than a nod and a grunt, the second mate hurried up and jumped into the boat while it was still swinging, quickly followed by his harpooner, a Portuguese from the islands of the Azores, far off the coast of Portugal. His name was Miguel Dalgardo, and he was new to the crew, having been shipped at Fayal, three weeks before. Wiki and the remaining three lowered the boat into the sea, and when it hit the waves they jumped down into it and took up their oars.

The second mate was also new to the ship, having been shipped at Fayal at the same time as Miguel. The old hands watched him warily, because this was the first time they had raised whales since he had come on board, and as he was over sixty, far too old for the whaling trade, they fully expected him to let them down. However, he stood like a gnarled warrior at his great steering oar as he sang out encouragement, and the boat pulsed on toward the spouting whales.

Then they were up to the pod. "Stand, Miguel!" the second mate cried as the boat drew up to the first huge bull, and the Portuguese harpooner put down his oar, and stood up in the bow, while the oarsmen watched him surreptitiously over their shoulders. Despite their blackest suspicions, he immediately made it obvious that he had done this many times before too. Without the barest hint of fear, he braced his thigh into the notch in the bow thwart, gripping

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the ash handle of the harpoon and aiming it unwaveringly as with a great stinking belch the bull whale spouted.

The second mate had steered well—the boat was directly in line with the hump. "Let him have it, Miguel!" he shouted, his tone quivering madly with excitement. *Thump!* went the iron, and the whaleline whistled out. Off went thirty fathoms as the whale startled, and then the second mate reached down and snubbed it to the loggerhead.

With a tremendous lurch the whaleboat straightened up, and then it surged forward at a cracking pace, tugged along in the wake of the whale. Spray flew all around them, and everyone—except for Wiki, who, being the most junior hand, had the job of bailing out—hung onto the sides. The Nantucket sleighride didn't last long, because the whale tired out fast. After a few gigantic circles he slowed and then sank to a stop, and the old second mate ordered shakily, "Haul line, boys, haul line!"

There had most surely been a lot of death on the old Nantucket whaleship *Paths of Duty*.

His voice was so strange that Wiki looked curiously up at him, to see that the old man's face was flushed scarlet and purple. The veins in his forehead stood out like worms, and his reddened eyes popped. The oarsmen in the bow were hauling hard on the whaleline to bring the boat up to the whale's side, dragging it in and tossing loose coils into the bottom of the boat. This was the moment when the second mate was supposed to change places with the harpooner. He was meant to step daintily along the length of the boat to the bow, pick up the sharp-bladed lance, and finish off the whale. Instead, however, he dropped dead.

Wiki watched the old fellow double over, and paw feebly at the air. Then there was a big thud as he collapsed in a heap. For a moment, there was blank silence in the boat, punctuated by the swish of the sea and a snort and a slap as the whale recovered his wits and sounded, taking the line and harpoon with him before anyone could do anything about it. At that moment, everyone in the boat was too stunned even to notice the whale's departure. Someone reached out a tentative hand and nudged the second mate, but it was already plain to all that he was lifeless.

As the boat's crew marveled after they got back on board, his very last words had been, "Haul line, boys, haul line!" The sailors of the *Paths of Duty* thought that this was truly remarkable, much more notable than the manner of his death. The second mate had

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definitely been too old for the whaling trade, liable to heart attacks because of the moments of great excitement that whaling involved—as everyone knew, Captain Smith had hired him only because he was desperate for an officer. While it was bad luck to lose him so soon, no one could say it was unexpected.

Consequently, the funeral, when the captain said a prayer and the shrouded corpse was tipped over the rail into the sea, was almost perfunctory. Not only was he old, but over the three weeks since they had left the Azores no one had got acquainted with the old man. However, the ritual at the foremast next day, when the dead mate's effects were auctioned off, was surprisingly solemn—or so Wiki noticed.

The captain presided, setting down the second mate's sea chest at the foot of the foremast, and then holding up his few belongings—a couple of shirts, a pair of shabby trousers, a few pipes, and a small bag of tobacco—and calling out for bids. According to tradition, the money raised would be sent to the dead man's family, something that not a soul on board the *Paths of Duty* believed for an instant, all of them being quite convinced that the captain pocketed the cash. However, the bids had come freely as men bought up the poor things, and the atmosphere had been remarkably somber—which, as Wiki found later that same day, had surprising consequences.

It was during the evening dogwatch, the time of the day when everyone on board relaxed a bit, and the routine of night watches hadn't yet started. Wiki was on the foredeck quietly digesting his supper, when out of the corner of his eye he saw one of the harpooners lunge up and lean on the starboard rail beside him. His name was Isaac Norton. Wiki thought he might be a Martha's Vineyard man because he had joined the ship at Edgartown. They hadn't had much to do with each other: Norton was the harpooner for a different whaleboat and bunked in the steerage instead of the forecastle. So when Isaac cleared his throat, Wiki merely lifted his eyebrows and nodded politely before returning his contemplative stare to the quiet water.

Then he heard Isaac remark grimly, "I don't want my gear sold off like that, not when I'm dead and gone."

Wiki paused, not at all sure what to say. Auctioning off the contents of the dead man's chest was the usual custom with whalemen, one that he thought quite sensible. Otherwise, not only would a place have to be found to store the dead man's duds over the several-years-long voyage, but other seamen, who as a rule did not have much in the way of belongings, wouldn't be able to put stuff he didn't need any more to good use.

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However, Norton didn't seem to need a reply, as he went on broodingly, "I guess you don't have customs like that where you come from. Don't you bury it all with the deceased, or summat like that?"

Wiki shook his head, biting back a grin. "Quite the opposite. When someone dies, people come from miles around to collect on debts, and it's amazing how much disappears."

"That's exactly it!" Norton exclaimed, animated.

"It's actually a kind of ritual plundering, what we call *muru*," Wiki informed him.

"And that's what I don't want to happen!"

"No?" said Wiki. He wondered greatly where this conversation was headed.

"Nope," said Norton firmly. Then he was silent a moment, his mouth pursing in and out as he stroked his stubbled chin and studied Wiki with sideways looks. Then he observed, "Folks tell me that even though you're jest a Kanaka, you know how to read and write."

"Aye, that's true," said Wiki, without taking umbrage. Though he was half American and the other half New Zealand Maori, he was so used to being called a *Kanaka*—the Yankee name for a Pacific Islander—that it didn't trouble him any more.

"You're sure?"

Wiki cast him an icy glance. "I told you—it's true."

"I didn't mean to cast aspersions," the harpooner said hastily. Wiki was big and well muscled, and had stood up for himself several times already this voyage. "It's just I had trouble believing it," Isaac Norton went on. "On account of you seem awful young to be educated. How old are you, anyways?"

"Seventeen," said Wiki. Before he had left New Zealand, his mother had told him to be sure to remember that he had been born in the year 1814, as Yankees set great store by birthdays.

The other nodded. "I s'pose you was educated by the missionaries."

As it happened, Wiki had originally learned to enjoy books because a drunken Yankee beachcomber—a man who, once upon a time, had been a respectable Edgartown captain—had taught him how to read. However, he kept a diplomatic silence, and at long last Isaac came out with what was on his mind.

"I want you to write my will," he said.

"Your what?"

"My Last Will and Testament. I'm not going to have my effects auctioned off at the foremast like that," Isaac said grimly. "And who knows what accidents might happen before we get back to the Azores?"

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"We're going back to Fayal?" exclaimed Wiki, very startled.

When they had been there three weeks previously, he had gone ashore at Fayal with the captain, to act as a witness. Hiring a new second mate and a new harpooner had been a long, drawn-out, difficult affair, because the United States consul had been so distracted. Not only were there locals in and out all the time trying to sell great baskets of onions and oranges to Captain Smith, but a visiting American merchant had stormed in to report the theft of a wallet of gold. What with all the commotion and bad temper, it had been many hours before they had been able to return to the ship. Having heard the skipper cursing Fayal so fluently, it now surprised Wiki greatly that he was entertaining the notion of revisiting the place. It was also highly unusual for anyone in the crew to know the ship's next destination, as all captains were convinced that their crews would start plotting desertion if they knew where they were headed, and so kept it a deadly secret.

"Fayal," confirmed Isaac Norton. "The cap'n reckons he's had enough of cruising around here, what with all the foul luck we've had, and so he wants to provision for the passage around Cape Horn. But he daren't continue the voyage without yet another replacement second mate, and another harpooner as well. We've lost too many of the after gang already, and he wants a harpooner in reserve."

Wiki nodded, understanding. There had been a lot of changes in the after cabin of the *Paths of Duty* in the three preceding months of voyage, what with the constant attrition of captains and officers. There had most surely been a lot of death on the old Nantucket whaleship—which brought them back to the matter of the will.

This turned out to be quite a simple affair, as Isaac Norton was leaving everything he owned to Miguel Dalgardo. Wiki felt puzzled, as Dalgardo had been on board such a very short time. However, it seemed that Miguel and Isaac had been shipmates on a previous voyage. The form of the document was more taxing than the contents, as Isaac insisted that it should look too official to ever be questioned. Wiki cut a blank page from the back of his journal, and headed it up in the beautiful copperplate script that the Edgartown beachcomber had taught him, but after he had written down the name of the single beneficiary, there was still a lot of empty space, which Isaac didn't like, perhaps because he thought someone might sneak in a few extra items after he was dead. In order to fill it up, Wiki asked him to list the items in his chest, which turned out to be just a few assorted shabby garments, a bar of soap, a spare pair of shoes, a couple of double-eagle dol-

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lars, and some tobacco. However, putting them down filled up the page the way Norton wanted.

"And of course," the harpooner pointed out, breathing heavily as he watched from behind Wiki's shoulder, "there's my lay."

"Of course," Wiki agreed. The lay was the share of the profits of the whaling voyage that was set out according to each man's position on board, the captain getting the biggest share, and a greenhorn like Wiki Coffin being allotted the smallest. It was impossible to tell what Isaac Norton's share would be, the voyage being a long way from over yet but as he was a harpooner, it would be respectable, maybe even as much as four hundred dollars at the end of four years.

With the setting down of that last important item, the will was complete. Wiki made a copy in a little notebook, just to keep the record straight, then he and Isaac signed the actual will, Isaac with a cross, and Wiki with a flourish. Wiki handed it over, Isaac went off a satisfied man, and Wiki thought that was the end of it.

However, it seemed that it was impossible to keep a secret on the old *Paths of Duty*. Isaac Norton proudly informed Miguel that he was his sole beneficiary, and so the story got to the other harpooners, and the harpooners told their boats' crews, and the ultimate result was that Last Wills and Testaments became all the rage on board the whaleship *Paths of Duty*. In view of the public demise of the second mate, Wiki supposed that it was reasonable that everyone should be feeling more mortal than usual, but as men kept on accosting him with a request to draw up their final documents, he thought it was very strange that he seemed to be the only man on board, apart from the officers, who knew how to read and write.

Then he found that he was the choice of notary public because he was the most junior member of the crew, and all his clients felt safe in the knowledge that they could gang up on him if he blabbed. If he had felt like talking there would have been some strange stories to tell, because some of the legacies were quite bizarre, with shirts being endowed to men who didn't fit them, tobacco going to those who did not smoke or chew, and an amazing number of bequests going to the captain, who was universally disliked.

It was almost a relief when Miguel Dalgardo came along, because his choice of inheritor was the first one that was logical. Predictably, Miguel responded to the compliment paid to him by Isaac Norton by leaving him the entire contents of his sea chest. He didn't even want to list them, even though, as he informed Wiki, those contents included his beautiful shore-going shirt,

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which had flowers lavishly embroidered on the collar and front. Altogether, Wiki enjoyed the job, as it gave him a chance to practice his Portuguese. He had found that he had a natural aptitude for foreign languages, and was fluent in Spanish already. Now, he was keen to get his Portuguese up to the same level, and so he and Miguel chattered together a good deal while the ship slowly forged her way to the islands, and by the time the ship got to the Azores they were conversing like brothers.

Isaac Norton's prediction had been wrong, however—the island where they made a landfall was not Fayal, but one of the other little islands of the group, Pico. Wiki, at the lookout post in the mainmast, watched as the mountain that formed the heart of Pico rose out of the horizon and gradually filled the sky. Narrow terraced fields ruled off the sides of the steep hills all the way up to the tiny meadows, maize gardens, and groves of orange trees that were dotted about the lofty heights, where little lacy waterfalls tumbled down to the sea. It was a very pretty scene, but Wiki meditated that it looked a hard place to make a living, and that it was not surprising that so many of the sons of the Azores could be found on the decks of American whalers.

It was a perfect day with a topgallant breeze, but instead of going in, Captain Smith gave orders to haul aback, lower a boat, and then lay off and on, which meant that the crew would keep the old ship tacking back and forth to keep her more or less in the same place in the water, about the most tedious job possible at sea. However, even if Pico had boasted any kind of anchorage, which was doubtful, the captain would have been too strapped for funds to pay for one, Nantucket shipowners being notoriously stingy.

Wiki was still aloft when Captain Smith called out to him, ordering him to go with the first boat. He wondered why, but then found out that the skipper wanted him to translate. Miguel was going too, but as he was one of the locals, the captain undoubtedly reckoned he could not be trusted an inch.

Down the boat rattled, and down the four oarsmen jumped after it. Wiki settled himself on the amidships thwart, and picked up his oar. Miguel had the bow oar, right in the bows, and Isaac Norton steered, while Captain Smith sat in the stern sheets with a boat cloak around him to protect his best broadcloth. The pull to the shore was easy, but there was a lot of trouble landing. There was nothing much of a slipway, so the oarsmen had to jump out into the knee-deep surf and drag the boat up the shingle beach.

Right ahead were low stone buildings, their facades washed with lime, evidently boatsheds and storehouses. A crowd of fishermen

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with seamed brown faces turned from their net mending to stare at the boat, while urchins gathered and yelled with excitement. Captain Smith ordered Miguel to chat with the fishermen and try to find out if there was anyone on this island willing to ship for a whaling voyage to the South Pacific, and to tell them that a man with enough experience to wield a sure harpoon could expect a generous lay. Sometimes, he said, it was easier to find hands like that than it was to bargain with the village governor. Then he told Wiki to come with him, leaving Isaac and the other three oarsmen to look after the boat.

A narrow path zigzagged up the steep cliff. High above, Wiki could glimpse the low whitewashed wall of a plaza, and the silhouette of a belfry beyond it. Then, as he followed Captain Smith upward, the plaza and the bell tower were hidden by the bulge of the mountainside. It was growing hot, and dust kicked up from his boots. There was a kind of low furze growing out of the pebbles and stones that rimmed the seaward edge, and from it emanated a stinging camphorlike smell when Wiki brushed against it, which he couldn't help doing, as the path was so very narrow in parts. There were small burrows pocking the face of the cliff to his left, and though he couldn't glimpse any life inside them, Wiki imagined scorpions and spiders and sharp bird beaks. He thought that he wouldn't like to traverse this very steep and narrow part of the path in the dark, when he would be forced to hug the cliff. The rocks and the sea seemed a long way below, and the *Paths of Duty* looked like a toy as she sailed slowly back and forth a half mile offshore. He could hear the distant yelling of the children as they vied for the strangers' attention, but the boat, the buildings, and the men were all hidden beneath a precarious-looking overhang.

Then at last they breasted the top, and the sunbaked plaza was spread out before them, paved with irregularly shaped stones, with blindingly white adobe binding them. A number of men were waiting, all in black suits save for one in a black gown who was evidently the village priest. With wonderful dignity, they greeted Captain Smith in both English and Portuguese, then ushered him and Wiki inside the dark coolness of one of the houses that bounded the square and offered hospitality. They sat at the table and Wiki translated while the village dignitaries complimented him gravely on his facility with their tongue.

Otherwise, it was just like Fayal, with people bustling in and out with cabbages, onions, and oranges to sell, all of which Captain Smith bought in great quantity. When Wiki was sent outside at noon—it not being thought proper that a common seaman should

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dine with his superiors—it was to find that the farmers who had made their bargains with Captain Smith were bringing in great heaps of baskets ready for the *Paths of Duty* sailors to lug back down to the beach.

Wiki spent the time wandering around and enjoying himself. He liked the strange sights—stone walls covered with grapevines, the plows drawn by heavy cattle, the insect-bitten horses, and the pigs led around by rope harnesses. Women entirely dressed in black, with black scarves over their heads, came out of the doorways of their whitewashed cottages, and offered him hunks of chewy, freshly baked bread—*bolo*—with tiny hard-boiled eggs to eat, along with deep mugs of warm milk; they pinched his cheeks to see his creased-up grin, admired his olive skin, and told him that they were very relieved that he was going away on the American ship, as otherwise he would seduce their daughters. He asked many questions about Pico, and received many interesting answers.

All too soon he was called back inside. However, Captain Smith was in a good mood because he had found a replacement officer, a local who had risen as high as third mate on his last voyage on a New Bedforder, and who was looking for another berth. No sooner had Wiki witnessed the cross he put on the ship's articles than an experienced harpooner presented himself at the door. Looking extremely gratified, Captain Smith sent them off, giving Wiki orders to tell Isaac to get the two new men to the ship, and then bring back three boats with their crews, because he needed twelve hands to lug his shopping down to the beach.

Wiki trudged back down the path in the hot mid-afternoon sun behind the new officer and harpooner, listening to them talking with each other, and watching his feet as he carefully pushed between the aromatic furze and the burrowed cliff face. The two local men didn't seem to notice the dangers of the path at all; it was as if the steep plunge to the sea didn't exist for them. When they got to the bottom, Isaac and Miguel were sitting on the bottom of the upturned boat, talking with a tall, dark-faced young man. The scene was peaceful enough, but no sooner had Wiki passed on Captain Smith's orders than all hell broke loose.

Apparently, Miguel had promised the job of harpooner to the tall young man, whose name was Pedro. Not only was Pedro white lipped and furious when he found that the man with Wiki had been given the position already, but he refused to accept defeat. Instead, he demanded that Miguel resign from the ship so he could have *his* job; it was a matter of honor, he claimed. Then, when Wiki tried to reason with him, both Pedro and Miguel

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turned round and blamed *him* for the strange situation.

In the end, much to his relief, Isaac Norton, as the most senior crew member present, took charge. He ordered Wiki to take the boat to the ship with the new officer at the steering oar, while he went up to the plaza with Miguel and Pedro. By the time Wiki came back with the extra two boats, he said, Captain Smith would have sorted it out.

Wiki watched the three of them set off up the track, and then turned to the job of shoving the whaleboat back out into the surf. The other oarsmen, he saw, were eloquently rolling their eyes at the antics of Pedro and Miguel; the fishermen, who were still mending their nets, shook their heads in wonderment too. When they got to the ship, it seemed very peaceful on board, in contrast to events on shore. Mr. Starbuck, the first mate, listened to Wiki's report, and then ordered two more boats lowered, and off they rowed again.

Not only did Wiki have his back to the beach as he pulled at his oar, but the lowering sun was in his eyes. Before he even turned round to look, however, he became acutely aware of the atmosphere of consternation and panic. As he helped haul the boat onto the shingle, he saw that the fishermen were no longer mending their nets. Instead, they were gathered around a body.

It was Miguel Dalgardo. By the state of his corpse it was not just obvious that he was irretrievably dead, but also that he had been killed by a long fall from the cliff. Wiki, who had come to like him while they were conversing in Portuguese, felt a stab of awful sadness.

Pedro stood at the back of the group, with a couple of fishermen standing close at either side of him like sentries, and his eyes sliding everywhere with shock and fear. It was obvious that the fishermen, having heard all the fuss when Pedro had claimed Miguel's job, knew exactly who to blame for Miguel's death—Pedro himself.

The instant he saw Wiki he burst into a torrent of Portuguese, assuring him that though, yes, he was very anxious to obtain a berth on the Yankee whaleship, as whaling with Americans was the route to a fortune as well as adventure, he would never, most certainly never, stoop to the murder of a man in order to secure even the favorable position Captain Smith was offering. He had not even been a witness to the terrible accident, he vowed. Being so familiar with the way up to the plaza, he had been a long way ahead of the other two when he heard Miguel cry out and then the awful sounds as he bounced off rocks all the way to the bottom of the cliff.

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Isaac Norton was there too, gray faced and grim. Wiki went up to him and asked, "Did you see Pedro push Miguel?"

Isaac shook his head. "I was a long way behind," he said. "I've never felt a qualm about heights before; going aloft to fix the topgallant in a stormy night has never worried me a jot, but that bloody track up the cliff had me spooked. The people here ain't regular people, they're human goats! And then," he added, "there was the snake."

"Snake?" echoed Wiki, startled.

"Aye. Did you see them nasty little burrows dug into the cliff? I was watching them, and watching the edge of that bloody path too. When a snake slid out of one of them holes, it stopped me dead in my tracks, I tell you. I didn't shift an inch until he had gone his way, and by that time the other two were well out of sight. I guess," Isaac said lugubriously, "that's when Pedro grabbed his chance to get rid of the opposition."

Wiki frowned, but before he could say anything, Captain Smith arrived. Predictably, he was furious. Not only had he lost yet another man, and a good harpooner at that, but the only likely replacement was unavailable, being under deep suspicion of murder. He snapped out orders for a gang to head up the path—and watch their confounded feet while they did it, as he didn't want any more losses, thank you—and heave the baskets of provisions back to the beach and out to the ship; but all the time he knew that it was pointless to hurry because he would have to hang around to witness the burial, while all the time they were wasting good daylight hours that would have been better spent a-whaling.

Wiki was one of those who stood at the side of the open grave early next morning, as Miguel Dalgardo was interred in the dry soil of Pico. The rest of his boat's crew attended too, but Wiki thought that he was probably the only one who felt any real grief. When he looked around at the blazingly blue sky, the dusty trees, and the distant yellow maize fields, it all seemed unreal. Black-clad women stood at a distance while the priest intoned in Latin, and a young boy in a surplice waved a censer that emitted a thread of fragrant smoke.

As the first clods of earth hit the top of the plain coffin, Captain Smith walked away, followed by the boat's crew, with Wiki. As Wiki trudged down the narrow path, he carefully watched his feet, noticing yet again how pebbles rolled to the side and then disappeared. There was no movement at all in any of the burrows that dotted the side of the cliff.

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When they were finally at sea, with all fair-weather canvas spread, it felt a lot more like real life. Then, to Wiki's surprise, Mr. Starbuck, the first mate, called for all hands to attend the auction of Miguel Dalgardo's belongings. The officers did not know about the passion for making wills on the *Paths of Duty*, he deduced.

He looked about for Isaac Norton, to see how he was taking it. As expected, the harpooner was hurrying toward Mr. Starbuck, and saying urgently, "Sir, an auction ain't necessary, and I'll tell you why—" However, the first mate wouldn't listen, ordering Isaac to assemble with the others.

Wiki stood to one side as the crew arrived and shuffled about in a huddle. They all watched as Miguel's sea chest was brought out of the steerage and placed at the foot of the foremast. Wiki's thoughts were flying. Isaac said again, "Sir—" but Wiki interrupted. Before he even fully realized he was going to do it, he stepped forward and said very firmly, "I would like to bid two dollars for Miguel's chest, sir."

Everyone swung about and stared at him. Isaac Norton shouted, "You can't do that!"

Wiki lifted an eyebrow. "I beg your pardon?"

"Damn it—you're the man who drew up his goddamned Last Will and Testament, so you know that you can't do that, Wiki Coffin!"

"And where in his will does it say I can't buy his chest?"

"He left everything to me, and you know it!"

"He left you the *contents* of his chest, not the chest itself." Wiki drew out the little notebook where he had copied the details of every single will he had drawn up. Slowly, very aware of the weight of the concerted attention of everyone on deck, he turned to the right page and read out the simple sentence that had made up the body of Miguel Dalgardo's will. "*'I hereby bequeath the contents of my sea chest to my friend, Isaac Norton.'*" Then, as the silence dragged on, he repeated, "So I would like to buy the chest, sir, once Isaac has claimed the contents."

"But that ain't right!" Isaac exclaimed.

Mr. Starbuck, who had been staring from Isaac to Wiki and back again from the black shadow of his wide-brimmed hat, shifted for the first time, and said, "It sounds reasonable to me. The right thing for me to do is empty out this here chest, give you all the contents, and then take bids on the chest itself, just as Wiki says."

Isaac went white and shouted, "No!" —but too late. Without bothering to argue anymore, Mr. Starbuck bent down, opened the lid, and tipped the contents out.

The first thing Wiki saw was the famous shore-going shirt. It was

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as gorgeously embroidered as Miguel had promised, and he felt another stab of sorrow. Next to it was a black wallet, and when Mr. Starbuck's thick, tobacco-stained fingers opened the wallet, a stream of gold coins fell out.

"So Miguel was the man who robbed that merchant in Fayal!" Captain Smith exclaimed. "No wonder he was so relieved to get on board and away!"

Until Wiki heard his voice, he hadn't realized that Captain Smith had come on deck to witness the disposal of Miguel's earthly goods. He turned to him and said evenly, "Sir, if you send a boat into Pico, I think Pedro will still be willing to sign articles, seeing that you are going to be in need of another harpooner."

The captain's little eyes studied him shrewdly. "You don't reckon Pedro was Miguel's killer?"

Wiki nodded. "Isaac Norton was the man who pushed him off the cliff," he said.

Everyone swung around and stared at Isaac, who had gone whiter than ever. "He was my friend!" he shouted. "Why the devil would I kill him?"

"Because you had found out he had the wallet of gold," Wiki said with utter sureness. "You were the one who started the craze for making wills on board the ship, and you made certain that Miguel knew that you had made him your heir. After that, it was only a matter of time before Miguel returned the favor by leaving everything to you. Then all you needed was a good chance to finish him off. Climbing the cliff was the perfect opportunity because Pedro and Miguel had already quarreled publicly, and you had the perfect scapegoat. Once Pedro was out of sight ahead, all that was necessary was to give Miguel a shove."

Isaac Norton shouted, "You can't prove that—not in a thousand years!"

"You did it yourself, when you were stupid enough to embroider your lie with that tall tale of a snake," said Wiki with disdain.

"Why, what the hell do you mean?"

"There are no snakes on Pico."

"What?"

"There are no snakes in the Azores at all."

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DRIFTS

EVE FISHER

I stepped out of the car and the snow whirled up around my boots, burying them. The door shielded my face, and I clung to it for a minute. I could change my mind. I could get back inside, start it up, turn the heater on, warm up a bit, have a cigarette. I stepped away, thinking it over, and the wind slammed the door shut for me. I turned around, and the snow whipped me in the face.

I knew where I was. The car was behind me, facing southwest on the ice-covered gravel road that led to Lake Howard. I could see the top branches of the cottonwoods by the shore. They were waving in the wind, perhaps cheering a game on the ice, or for me to come to them for shelter. Back the other way, northeast, was a paved road that someone might come down. Either way, it was damned cold, and I had to make a choice to get moving or get back in the car. The snow was already packing up against the tires. I was already shivering. I pulled my muffler as tight around my face as I could and started walking.

I know snow. Blizzards are a fact of life up here. They're fun when you're safe at home, drinking coffee, looking out the window, and knowing there's no place you have to go, and even if there is, no one will expect you in this weather. You watch the snowdrifts pile up around the trees, around the cars, in that sinuous curve across the lawn that shows where the wind lines meet. When the first snow falls—usually in October—everybody hurries to get in their cars and try it out. Twenty winters and you still have to relearn how to drive in it. Every time, just when you think it's easy, you hit the brakes wrong and fishtail.

Later, in November, with the geese gone and the fields stubbling up through white powder, driving is easy, even when it's windy and the snow drifts across the road in a thin cloud. You have time to look along the sloughs, where the wind's broken the thin ice, at the water, gunmetal blue with white-capped waves, and rising from each individual wave is a little plume, a little flourish, of white.

And the early mornings and late evenings, after the fields have been blanketed solid, and the snow and the sky are the exact same

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color, and the only thing that tells you which way is up is the blue-black ribbon of highway.

And then the wind picks up, blowing the snow across that ribbon and under the wheels, where it writhes and dances and curves, giving the dizzying feeling of driving on something tangibly alive.

And later still, in the heart of winter, the snow leaps up from the road, down from the sky, and catches you somewhere in the middle, and driving a car becomes an act of desperation. You can't see, you can't hear, you can't speed up, and you sure as hell can't stop because who knows whether you're on the road or a drift or a field and who would ever find you? Who would ever find you?

I know snow. I've been out at fifteen below zero, with my hands like wood in my gloves, wood that aches, the cold crisping my legs and the snot running down my nose like a broken faucet. I've walked under trees so loaded with ice that they sound like glass when the wind blows, and walking among them is like walking under a forest of crystal swords. I've walked on top of ten foot snowdrifts, and broken through a deceptive crust down into a cold, wet, gray-pocked white grave and scrabbled my way out, wet and cold and aching.

I was cold and aching now. Inhale, the smell of wet wool; exhale, the warm wet of my breath. Inhale, the slap of my freezing muffler across my face; exhale, and it billows slightly away. Which is worse, the muffler scraping my face rawer and rawer, or the blizzard wind, which simply wants to freeze it all in one gust? The numb feet stumbling over hummocks too white to see, or the sharp twist in my back when I slip? The pounding in my chest, or the tightening of my neck? Is this the road, or did I drift to the field?

I stopped and tried to see. No blizzard simply blows hard in one direction; there are whirlpools and eddies and streams. It wraps the snow around you—follow the wind, and you'll dance in a circle until you drop down dead, and then it will cover you, gently and firmly. The High Plains, my cousin Bill once said, prove that the land is an ocean of earth, and the ocean is the wind turned to water. He froze to death in the snow last year. Out with some friends of his, all of them tanked. The cops came, and the guy who was driving was underage and panicked. Hit Bill, didn't even realize it. Forgot all about him. They found his body a few days later. Bill loved the winter, so maybe he died happy.

A lot of people die in the winter. The winter obituaries are full of the old: pneumonia, heart, stroke, and just wearing out. There are countless accidents: cars fishtail through intersections, flip, and land upside down on the freeway, slide off the road into the ditch, and break through the ice into frozen lakes. There's slush and sleet and

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the long white patches of icy snow by the shelterbelts that never melt until spring. There's black ice, which isn't black at all, but clear and invisible as glass. In town, people slip and fall on icy patches of sidewalk, breaking their wrists, their arms, their legs, their heads.

Three men went out driving in a blizzard once. They were crazy, and had had too much to drink. They got stuck in a snowdrift, and they were too drunk to do anything about it except get in the back seat and huddle for warmth. They just sat there, drinking some more, and the car was covered in snow. When they were found, three days later, the two men on the outside had frozen to death. Only the man in the middle had survived.

I scraped at the snow beneath me with my heel. Gravel, so I was still on the road. My eyelashes were white with snow and rime, and blinking hurt. I went forward, hunched again against the wind, which promptly whipped around and nearly knocked me down from the back. The paved road should be coming up soon. It had better be soon. There was a knot deep in my belly that was sheer cold, and I knew if it got much larger it would kill me.

It was the deputy who'd found the body who told me the story about the three men in the car. He wondered why they hadn't run up the radio antenna with a rag on it, to make it easier to find them. Personally—though I said nothing—I wondered if it had all been planned by the survivor. The perfect crime.

I finally reached the paved road. The snowplows hadn't been through here yet and wouldn't for a while—the lesser county roads come after the major county roads, which come after the state roads, which come after the interstate, and none of them get done while the wind is blowing. But there were tire tracks, so people had been out recently. I just had to decide which way to hike. I didn't want to hike anywhere. I wanted to stop. I wanted to rest. I wanted to sit down for a minute, curl up, and . . . and then I would get so cold I'd be warm, and I'd sleep and sleep and sleep and never wake up again. Like those two men in the car. Like Bill.

I turned to the left—northwest. If a car came by in this weather, they'd stop and pick me up. If no more cars came by, there was bound to be a farmhouse up the road. They'd let me in. And if they weren't in, their door would probably be unlocked. And even if it wasn't, and I could figure a way to get in, no one would nail me for breaking and entering. Not in a blizzard. I was going to be okay. I just had to keep going.

Winter's a dangerous thing to love. It's pure and it's gorgeous and it owns this land. It owns us. We sit in our houses with the heat turned up and think what a pretty day it is out there, with the sun gleaming on the snow or the snow dancing in the air. But a tree falls

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in the ice, and the power goes out, and we're ice men again. We're out on the road and we're full of the power of our automobiles and at the same time we know one little slip, one little mistake in judgment or speed, or just the chance encounter with a pebble or a bird or a deer and there we are, with winter laughing all around us. You live up here, and it doesn't take long to understand why crime rates drop like a stone come November. Winter takes the place of crime; winter takes the place of night; winter takes the place of the bogeyman and the mothman and the raptors and everything you've ever been afraid of. Winter rules everything, and if you don't know that, you don't know anything. And you will die.

There had been no cars. Everyone must have made it home and decided to stay there. There was a ghost of a road to my left, and I figured it led to a farmhouse. I turned. It was harder and harder to keep going. The wind kept pummeling me from all sides. The snow was an inch deep one step, six inches deep the next. Little drifts everywhere. I kept hoping that someone would come. I was praying this wasn't just a field road, that there really was a house at the end of it.

Dark clouds on the horizon—tall, overgrown lilac bushes, with leaves still on them. Behind them, firs and birches. A shelterbelt, and that meant a farm. I took as deep a breath as I could through my frozen muffler, my frozen face, and went on. More trees, and then a yard and, thank God, the buildings. I went past the garage, the outbuildings, and on to the house. Up the stairs to the front porch. The door was locked. I leaned against the door and tried not to die of despair. Then I made myself go back down and around to the back of the house. The back door was open.

The silence. The dark. The warmth. I pulled back my hood, unwrapped my muffler, stripped off my gloves, zipped down my parka. Snow sifted down all around me. I called out:

"Hello? Anybody home? Hello?"

Nothing. Silence. I looked around. I was in the mudroom. I knocked as much snow as I could off my boots—no reason to give my unknown benefactors more of a mess to clean up than was necessary—and opened the door into the kitchen. Dark and quiet. I called out again. Still no sounds. I flipped the switch. The lights didn't come on. The power must be out. I walked through into the dining room, the living room, the small bedroom, past the dark stairs leading to the darker second floor. A tiny bathroom reminded me how long I'd been out. It was cold and smelled of mildew, but at least it wasn't windy and snowing. I flushed and went back into the kitchen.

I desperately wanted something hot to drink. There was a kettle

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on a gas stove, so I tried the burner—it didn't light, but I could smell gas, so I turned it off and started looking for matches. They were in the cupboard by the stove. I filled the kettle, lit the burner, and looked around some more. I found cups in one cupboard, instant coffee in another, and in a dark corner of the kitchen, the telephone.

I had a decision to make. I thought it over while the water boiled, while I made a cup of coffee, while I drank it. It was the best coffee I'd ever had in my life. I sighed and went to the phone and dialed 911. The dispatcher who answered—probably in Laskin, thirty miles away—asked my name and location, and I read her the telephone number of where I was and how I'd gotten there and how there was nobody home. I told her about going out for a ride. She asked if I was crazy. I told her yeah, and how we'd skidded off the road, into the ditch. She asked if I'd been drinking. I told her no, but Nick had. She asked if Nick was with me. I told her no, that Nick had passed out and was still in the car. She expressed some concern about that.

"Can someone come get him?" I asked.

Maybe. The interstate was closed, the roads were horrendous, only emergency vehicles were allowed out, but maybe. I promised to stay put—where was I going to go? She said they'd do what they could, and we both said goodbye.

I made another cup of coffee, and watched the snow flying past the window. I'd given him a chance; that was more than he'd given Bill. The rest was up to winter.

THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

by Willie Rose

Each letter consistently represents another. The quotation is from a short mystery story. Arranging the answer letters in alphabetical order gives a clue to the title of the story.

S ATG IBZ CIDPR ANSUB FBZJ EBQCNJ CVGTZUA CIB ATLBCJ OTCOI. AIB USUQ'C YQVG PDOI TRVDC EDQA, RDC AIB YQBG CITC PDOI.

—ZTJPVQU OITQUNBZ

CIPHER: _

ANSWER: A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

Solution on page 62

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GREEN FISH BLUES

JOHN H. DIRCKX

The shadow of the Venetian blinds, etched by the sun on the wall of the breakfast nook, faded out and sharpened again as clouds tumbled across the sky on this breezy June morning. Detective Sergeant Cyrus Auburn yawned over the headlines in the morning paper while half-listening to the chugging and burbling of the electric percolator, the clicking and clatter made by birds rummaging in the roof gutters for food and nest-building materials, and the creaking of the east side of the house warming up.

The giggle of his digital phone in the bedroom summoned him to the cool, dark side.

"Cy, it's Laporte. You're not on the road yet, are you?" Lieutenant Gavin Laporte, third watch commander. "On your way in, touch base with Dollinger and Krasnoy at the corner of Jardine and Pace. They've got a citizen down."

"Drowning?"

"Shooting. Elderly female. Apparently robbed."

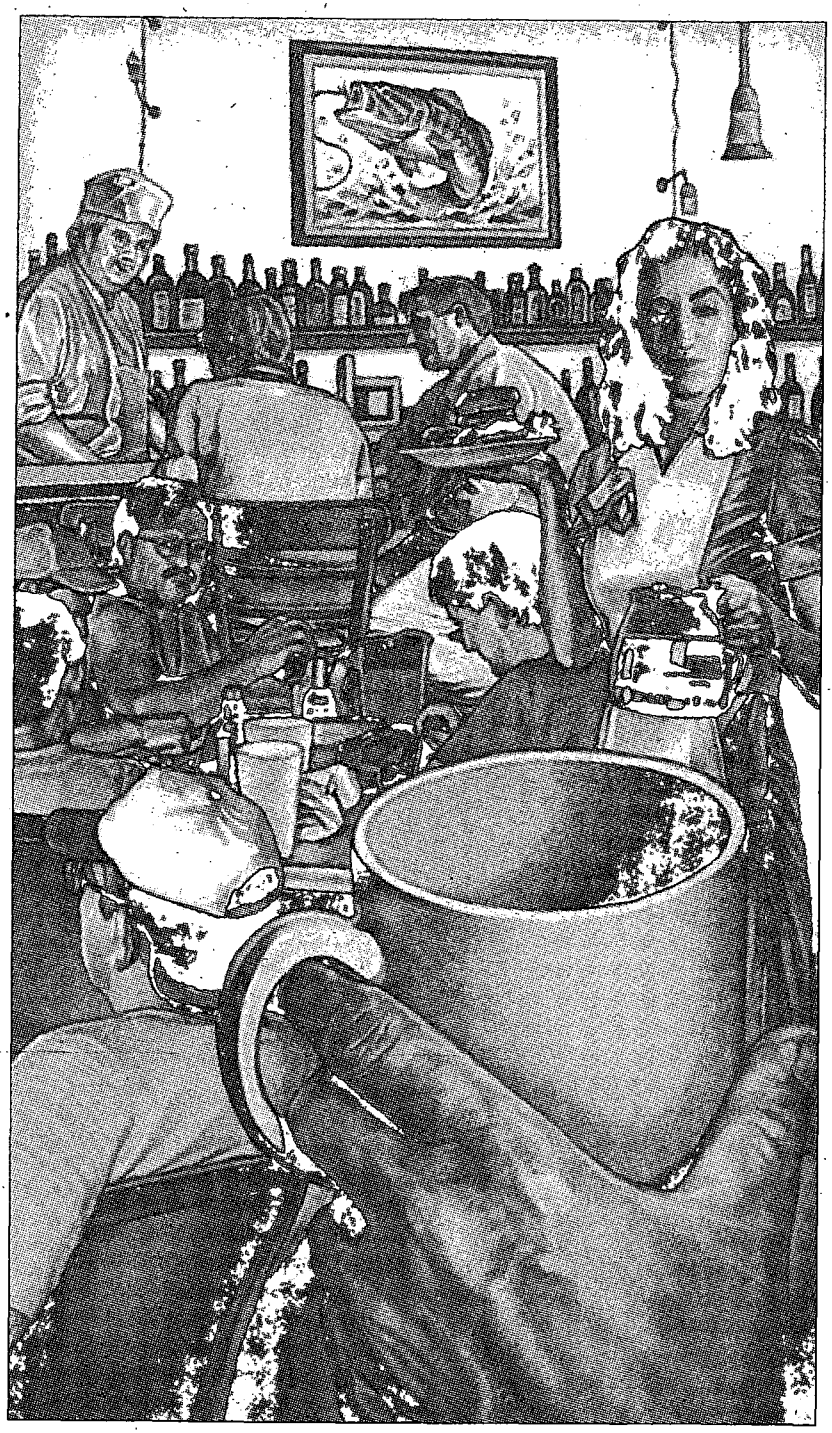
"ID?"

"Ida Claire Blanford. Single, aged seventy-four. Retired schoolteacher. Shot down within a few yards of her house. An evidence tech will be at the scene by the time you get there."

The corner of Jardine and Pace wasn't exactly on Auburn's way to headquarters. The two streets met at a right angle and ended, at the south bank of the river, in an older residential district that was gradually degenerating into a slum. It had once been a flourishing urban neighborhood, but its development had been arrested by the natural barrier of the river, and property values had begun to decline as many of the houses slowly disintegrated in the hands of absentee landlords.

Between the river and the point where Jardine and Pace deadended into each other there was a broad grassy levee planted with oaks, which were just now coming into leaf. Auburn saw a cruiser and an evidence van parked on the street, and festoons of yellow

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Ron Chironna

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tape at the crest of the levee, fringed by the inevitable crowd of onlookers. Climbing up himself, he found Patrolmen Fritz Dollinger and Terry Krasnoy down near the water conferring with Kestrel, the evidence technician from headquarters.

Ancient sycamores grew along the water's edge, some of them leaning far out and ready to topple because their massive roots had been undermined by the scour of the current when the river was high. But it hadn't rained for more than a week now, and the river had dwindled to a sluggish stream barely an eighth of a mile wide, leaving broad, slimy mud flats along both banks.

The body of the victim lay, on a sloping stretch of bank well out from solid ground, under a blue plastic sheet weighted at the corners against the breeze with stones. A black leather handbag rested on top of the sheet. Auburn noticed a rowboat equipped with a trawling motor moored to a tangle of wild shrubbery a few yards downstream. On the far bank of the river he could see a few spectators clustered on balconies and at upper windows.

Patrolman Krasnoy gave him a quasi-military salute. "Good morning, Sergeant," he said. "We didn't know if they were sending you or the Coast Guard."

"Are you sure this isn't a drowning?"

"We didn't do an autopsy yet," said Dollinger, "but her clothes are dry. Except for right around the hole in her chest. Take a look."

Kestrel, the evidence man, registered acute distress. "Afraid I'll have to veto that for now," he said. "You can't get near the body without making more tracks in the mud, and I haven't shot any pictures yet."

"I can wait," said Auburn. "What do we know?"

"A fisherman in a boat spotted the body an hour or so ago," said Dollinger. "He's around somewhere. He already filled out a 201, but we asked him to hang loose till you talked to him. When he saw the body, he tied up, climbed the levee, and called Public Safety from a bar and grill up there. The guy who runs the bar came across for a look at the body and recognized her as the woman who lives in that house right there."

He pointed to a huge, old white frame house, not a hundred yards away. Its long narrow back yard extended all the way to the riverbank, from which it was separated by a stone wall. The property was well maintained, and beds of spring flowers in the side yards relieved the severity of the house's boxy architecture.

A black iron fence enclosed the entire lot except for the driveway. An old-fashioned mailbox was mounted on the fence next to the gate at the sidewalk in front of the house. Even at this distance Auburn could read the name Blanford stenciled on it.

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"Anybody home over there?"

"Nobody came to the door," said Krasnoy. "The man from the bar, Casteven, says she lived alone."

Auburn glanced at the handbag lying on the plastic sheet. "Any confirmation of her ID?"

"Couple credit cards in the name of Ida Blanford. No cash in the handbag, just a bunch of keys and some personal stuff. DMV says she didn't have a current driver's license because of substandard vision."

Kestrel, having taken several photographs for orientation, passed the handbag to Auburn and removed the sheet from the body. A murmur of ghoulish satisfaction went up from the growing crowd.

The dead woman lay spread-eagled on her back, with her head about a foot and a half from the water. Her eyes were half open, her refined features set in a sallow mask, her bobbed white hair disheveled. She wore no jewelry. Her floral print blouse clearly showed a blood-ringed hole just left of center in the chest. There were smears of mud on her light blue slacks but none on the soles of her shoes.

While Kestrel went on taking pictures, Auburn examined the contents of the handbag—a hairbrush, a handkerchief, a ring of nine keys, a pair of thick trifocals in a crushproof case, a package of chewing gum. A compact billfold contained two credit cards, a Social Security card, and a senior citizen's discount card, but no money and no further identification.

"Rigor is pretty well advanced," Kestrel said, now squatting beside the body. "It would have been cool down here by the water last night, but even so, I'd say she must have been dead since midnight."

"Somebody should have heard a shot," said Auburn.

"The guy at the bar and grill didn't," said Dollinger. "He lives upstairs over there. We didn't ask anybody else yet, but that's right up top on our agenda."

"One wonders," said Krasnoy, "why they didn't just throw her and her bag in the river."

"They may have tried, and missed the water in the dark," said Dollinger. To Auburn, he added, "They must have tossed her from up here on the grass. Terry and I made those footprints when we covered her up, and they're the only ones near the body."

"Any bloodstains or other traces around here on the grass, or over on the sidewalk?"

"No blood that we could see," said Krasnoy, "and no shell. Here comes our ancient mariner," he added under his breath.

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Auburn turned to see a stocky middle-aged man stepping with pompous self-assurance over the yellow tape and descending the bank. With his floppy-brimmed hat adorned with fishing flies and his sunburnt nose, he looked like something straight out of a beer commercial on TV. When he got closer, Auburn sensed that he had indeed just had a beer, if not two, at the establishment across the street.

His name was Fred Shannoy; he was on a two week vacation from his job with an advertising agency. "I'm not what you'd call a serious fisherman," Shannoy assured him. "Anything I catch I throw back. I figure it's going to be full of lead or mercury or radioactive wastes anyway . . . Hey, I don't even like fish."

Auburn obliged him with the expected chuckle. "Do you own the boat, Mr. Shannoy?"

"Rented. I showed the papers to the officers here."

"Where did you cast off this morning?"

"The landing at the park up in Stillwell, around seven. Told them that too. I was just drifting with the current, looking for a shady spot to tie up, when I saw this old gal lying here on the bank. Kind of like a sunbather, you know? Except she was in the shade and she had all her clothes on. And then when I got close enough, I saw she was . . . uh . . . well, you know. Not with us any more."

Just the sort of circumlocution, thought Auburn, that one might expect from an advertising man.

"So I pulled in and tied up downstream there and came ashore." He glanced briefly at his muddy shoes. "The place across the street, The Green Fish, wasn't open for business yet, but there was a truck there delivering meat, so I went in and called you guys. That . . . that's a bullet hole, isn't it?"

"That's what it looks like. Are you familiar with this area?"

"No, sir. Never been here before, either by land or by sea."

"Did you see anybody here on the bank besides the dead woman?"

"No. Not on this side of the river, anyway. I saw a few joggers and pedestrians over on the downtown side."

Auburn was making a final check of Shannoy's written statement when Nick Stamaty from the coroner's office arrived. Dark and heavily built, Stamaty dressed like a college president, moved with the grace of a sumo wrestler, and radiated the sincerity of a Sunday-school teacher.

"Straighten your ties, guys," he said, before even looking at the remains of Ida Blanford. "The camcorders are coming."

Auburn stepped up to the brow of the levee and peered down

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into the street. "It's Channel Four," he reported to the others. "They usually behave pretty well."

After sending Shannoy off to resume his fishing, Auburn filled Stamaty in on the details thus far known. Stamaty unslung his camera case and checked the position of the sun. "Let me get some pictures. Then we'll see if one of those keys gets us in the house."

While waiting for Stamaty to finish his work around the body, Auburn walked west along the top of the levee, away from where the TV crew were setting up, and surveyed the scene from a distance. A quarter of a mile downstream stood a massive steel-truss railroad bridge, no longer in use.

The broad, shallow river had never supported much traffic, but since the rebuilding of the dam at Tippettsville in the 1960's to prevent spring flooding, it amounted to little more than a stream. A hulking wharf and warehouse, part wood and part brick, stood at the water's edge just this side of the railroad bridge. A row of cars parked outside the warehouse indicated that it was still being put to some use.

Stamaty was adding the final touches to a sketch on a clipboard when he caught up with Auburn. His left little finger was hooked through Ida Blanford's big ring of keys. "Looks like point-blank range to me, Cy," he said.

The crumbling sidewalk in front of the house had been marked long ago for repairs with red spray paint and then apparently forgotten. The mailbox was empty. The hinges on the gate needed oil. But the tree-shaded lawn was neatly trimmed and free of weeds. They waited a full minute after Auburn manipulated the knocker on the front door before starting to try keys in the lock.

The house was dark, quiet, and cool. Not a trace of disorder or a speck of dust spoiled the old-fashioned but opulent decor, as if Ida Blanford had known, the last time she left, that she would never return. Auburn recalled that she'd been a schoolteacher. From the entry hall they passed into a parlor that looked like a principal's office, a kitchen like a high school physics lab, and a dining room as bare as the refectory of a convent. Every light they turned on in the parlor blazed with maximum wattage. A reading glass rested on the desk, another next to the chair in the front window.

Further exploration revealed a pantry, another parlor, and an enclosed back porch facing the river. The rear parlor was somewhat more habitable than the front one, with shelves of old books, family photographs in silver frames, more bright lights, and more magnifying glasses. Every window on the ground floor was closed and latched. Deadbolts were shot on side and back doors.

There was no computer in the house, no answering machine

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attached to any of the antiquated dial phones, not even a television set. Of the bedrooms upstairs, Ida Blanford had used only the front one. In the other rooms they found stored furniture, locked trunks, cardboard cartons secured with heavy cord. The heirs, if any, were going to have a circus digging through the spoils and apportioning them.

The basement was nearly empty, probably because of the damp that reigned there. Another of the keys on the ring got them into the detached garage. There was no car—just a broken porch swing, several dozen red clay flowerpots, a formidable array of gardening implements, several pieces of furniture that belonged in a landfill, and a bicycle that belonged in the Smithsonian.

Returning to the back parlor for a more focused search, they found an address book containing the address and phone number of a Dale Blanford in East Atlas, about seventy-five miles away. Auburn used his cell phone to call East Atlas.

"Dale Blanford." A man in his thirties, his voice crisp and assertive.

"This is Detective Sergeant Auburn calling, sir. About a Miss Ida Blanford. I believe she's a relative of yours?"

"She's my aunt." Still crisp, now expectant and slightly challenging.

"I'm afraid I have some bad news for you, sir. Miss Blanford was found dead this morning near her home."

"*Found* dead? What happened to her?"

"At first glance it looks to us like she was shot in the course of a robbery."

The man at the other end of the line muttered something that might have been profanity. "Was this a break-in?"

"No, sir. There's no evidence of that. We're inside her house now. We found it locked and we don't see any evidence of damage or theft. Her body was found on the riverbank just east of here."

"You can understand this comes as kind of a shock. I'm trying to get myself together."

"Are there other relatives besides yourself?"

"No. Well, my sister, but she lives in California. What do I need to do?"

"As soon as our investigation here at the scene is finished, your aunt's body will be removed to the mortuary. The coroner will want you to go there and make a formal identification. I'm going to turn you over to Mr. Stamaty from the coroner's office if you'll hold the line just a moment."

Stamaty expressed sympathy in businesslike tones, gave Blanford information and directions, and handed the phone back to Auburn.

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"This is Auburn again. I'd like to talk to you eventually so we can work up a profile on your aunt for our report and possibly get some ideas on what happened to her. I'll give you a number that will reach me no matter where I am, and I'd appreciate it if you'd call me when you get to town."

"Okay, but, like I told the other gentleman, it may be sometime this afternoon before I can get away."

After Auburn hung up, Stamaty explained that Blanford was building a deck somewhere in the wilds of Carney County. "Says he can't leave until he's sure his guys are far enough along to finish up without him."

They locked the house and returned to the riverbank. Kestrel had already left the scene and the body was once again draped in blue plastic. The crowd of spectators was getting bored and thinning out. The TV crew idled patiently in the shade. After touching base with Dollinger and Krasnoy, Auburn crossed the street to the bar and grill on the corner of Jardine and Pace.

The Green Fish looked as if it might have started out as a neighborhood restaurant and sunk slightly in status in order to keep its owner out of the red. The front window bore the image, in cracked and fading paint, of a spirited bass writhing at the end of a line amid churning foam. Lettering, somewhat less faded, offered BEER, LIQUOR, AND FOOD. The door facing Jardine St. was marked FAMILY ENTRANCE. Auburn went in.

The place was a little busier than might have been expected at nine thirty in the morning. Three men, each in his own world, were downing eye-openers at the bar, which ran back along the left side, opposite the windows facing out on Pace Street. A stainless steel lunch counter, reminiscent of an old-fashioned diner, was set at a right angle to the bar. Behind it a stocky man in a white apron and chef's cap wielded skillets and spatulas with skill and dispatch.

At the counter and at booths and square tables in the front part of the building, seven people were having breakfast. A couple of tinny speakers in the ceiling gave forth the current output of a local rhythm-and-blues station. In the narrow spaces among the tables, a solitary waitress was juggling plates and cups. Most of the customers, even the ones at the counter, seemed to be watching the crowd across the street through the plate glass window with the picture of the green fish. Nobody, not even the waitress, paid much attention to Auburn.

He stepped to the counter and caught the cook's eye. "Excuse me, sir. Police officer." He showed identification.

"Scotty Casteven. Chief cook and flycatcher."

"Are you the proprietor?"

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"That too."

"I understand you identified the body of Miss Ida Blanford across the way this morning?"

"I don't know about the Ida part." Casteven, tending an order of hash browns and a couple of waffles, wasn't looking Auburn's way. Everybody else in the place was. "I never heard her first name before. We always called her Miss Ramford—you know, like Ramrod. That's what my wife called her because she walked so stiff."

"But you definitely recognized her?"

"As the old gal that lived in the white house across the street, sure. I've seen her out there a thousand times, getting the mail out of the box, working in the garden, raking leaves, walking to the bus." He broke off to shout some cryptic message to the waitress.

"Would your wife know anything more about her?"

"Maria died three years ago. Heart." His expression clouded and he turned back to the grill.

"Sorry. What time did you close last night?"

"We close at eleven sharp except Friday and Saturday."

"I understand you live here on the premises. Were you home last evening?"

"Yes, sir. I already told those two cops over on the bank that I didn't hear any shots last night, no yelling, no commotion, nothing."

The waitress kept circulating among the tables, refilling cups and glasses, removing dirty dishes, taking further orders. Two people left their table and stepped to the cash register where the lunch counter and the bar intersected. Casteven put down his tools, wiped his hands on his apron, and took their money.

In the circumstances there was obviously no question of a private interview. Auburn decided to turn that to his advantage. Raising his voice slightly, he addressed the whole bunch. "If anybody here has any information about the woman who was killed across the street last night or about what happened to her, I'd appreciate it if you'd let me know. If you don't want to talk to me here, you can call Public Safety any time day or night and ask for Sergeant Auburn."

In compliance with the mysterious laws that govern crowd behavior, nobody was looking at him now.

The couple who had just left had vacated the table in the window. On a whim, Auburn sat down there himself. The heat and humidity were building up outside, and from here he had a view of Ida Blanford's house and the adjacent riverbank, except for the site where the body lay.

Eventually the waitress stopped beside his table. "Did you

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want to order something, Officer?"

Her name tag said "Darla." She was fighting a losing battle with the calendar over the issue of turning thirty. She was lean, hungry, and overdecorated, the kind of woman Auburn's father described as "a shark in mascara."

"Just coffee, thanks."

"Cream and sugar?" she asked over her shoulder, already halfway to the serving stand in the corner where two coffeepots steamed gently on hot plates.

"No, thanks."

Auburn sipped his coffee slowly and meditatively, dividing his attention between the shrinking crowd outside and the customers of the The Green Fish. The bar and grill may not have been the heart of the neighborhood, but it probably reflected the rhythm and flavor of local life as accurately as anyplace else.

Customers left, others came in. They all seemed to know what was going on across the street. And from the way the newcomers looked at him, Auburn sensed that they also knew, as if by telepathy, that he wasn't an ordinary patron but a detective engaged in the investigation. From time to time one of them lingered by his table, ostensibly peering across the street through the plate glass window with the picture of the fish on it, but also taking the opportunity to give him the once-over at close quarters.

Most of them were obviously regulars, but Auburn suspected that a couple of the bar patrons had hiked the six blocks from the Greyhound bus station on Guinan Boulevard for quick nips during layovers. The regulars, nearly all of them men, didn't look a prosperous lot. There were the usual neighborhood retirees, a few younger people possibly out of work for one reason or another, a couple of unclassifiables.

Scotty and Darla worked smoothly together, communicating in the quaint jargon of the hash slinger and taking turns serving drinks at the bar, collecting payments at the cash register, and feeding dirty dishes to the huge automatic dishwasher in the corner. The radio droned and twanged on, at times barely audible above the clatter of dishes and the mutter of voices.

Because the two streets out front dead-ended into each other, there was virtually no traffic. The only cars and trucks that ever moved into Auburn's field of vision seemed to belong to patrons of The Green Fish. Over on the levee, he could see Dollinger and Krasnoy giving brief and no doubt suitably vague answers to the television reporter. Kestrel was going over the sidewalk inch by inch like a man who has lost a contact lens in the snow. Ida Blanford's house stood solemn and empty, the front parlor

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ablaze with sunlight streaming in an east window.

Eventually Darla came back with more coffee.

"Do you live here in the neighborhood?"

"I used to live in the apartment upstairs." She rested the coffeepot on the table, leaned closer, and lowered her voice. "After Scotty's wife died he moved out of their place on Eversole, kicked me out, and moved in here himself. I've got an apartment now at the other end of the Randolph Street Bridge."

"Are you here every day?"

"Six days. We're closed Sundays. I work till eight, when the dining room closes."

"Has there been any kind of trouble in the neighborhood recently?"

"Like what kind of trouble?"

"Break-ins, vandalism, gangs, drugs . . . ?"

"Highmore's Grocery right over on the other corner closed up about three months ago. They said it was because they didn't have enough business, but Scotty and I think it's because they had two holdups in a row around Christmas time." She picked up the coffeepot.

"Did you know Ms. Blanford?" Auburn asked her.

She put the coffeepot down again. "Not to talk to. I saw her outside almost every day. She used to drive a big old Lincoln to go shopping and to go to church on Sundays, but we heard she totaled it and lost her driver's license because they said she was legally blind. Since Highmore's closed, you'd see her coming back from the bus stop with shopping bags maybe a couple days a week."

"Have you noticed anything unusual going on over at her place in the past few days?"

"No. Sometimes a younger man stops in the afternoon, usually on weekends. Sometimes he comes in a truck and other times he brings his family in a car—wife and two little boys. But I haven't seen them over there in the last month or two. I always figured they were family."

"Could I get your name, miss?"

She glanced down to make sure her name tag was showing. "Darlece Fontaine." She spelled both names.

Contrary to his usual procedure, Auburn didn't ask for an exact address and he didn't start a file card until she had gone away to serve other customers, and then he made only the sketchiest of notes.

A ten-year-old boy put his head in through the family entrance and called "Paper!" A man on one of the barstools asked if he had the world soccer scores.

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Across the way, Dollinger and Krasnoy took off in their cruiser, probably on a call. A few minutes later an ancient hearse stopped in the street outside with a screech of brakes, and two mortuary attendants disappeared over the brow of the levee with a body bag and a folding stretcher. After a lengthy interval they reappeared, loaded the remains of Ida Blanford into the hearse, and drove off with a squeal of rubber.

The TV crew, having captured that bit of history on tape, went their way. Some time later Stamaty and Kestrel left the scene also. At the house next to Ida Blanford's, a woman in a housecoat was shaking a dustmop into the breeze while her dog ran sniffing around the front yard. A pale, frail man with a cane was promenading slowly up and down the sidewalk in the late morning sun. Auburn sat on behind the grimy window with the painted green fish.

It wasn't the standard way to conduct a homicide investigation. He should have been leafing through Ida Blanford's private papers in search of suspicious associations, requesting a background probe on her and her nephew from Records, canvassing the neighborhood to learn if anyone had heard a shot, checking on recent holdups, muggings, and similar crimes in the district—in particular, the two holdups at the grocery across the street. Instead, he sat here soaking up the atmosphere of the bar and grill—the smell of cooking varied by an occasional whiff of liquor, the babel of voices, the jangling of music.

At a few minutes before eleven he went to the men's room and called headquarters on his cell phone. His immediate superior, Lieutenant Savage, had received a radio report from Dollinger and Krasnoy, who had questioned neighbors up and down the block without finding anyone who had heard a shot the night before or observed anything unusual in the vicinity of Ida Blanford's house. Savage had ordered a background probe on the victim and was talking to Fire and Rescue about having the river dragged for the weapon.

"I don't know if you remember it," he said, "but they found the gun that killed Stan Karlowski on the bottom of the river about a quarter of a mile from where you are right now."

"I remember. It looks like the killer tried to toss her body in the river. I wouldn't be surprised if he tossed the gun in too."

Auburn indicated somewhat vaguely that he'd be at the scene for a while yet. He didn't mention that he was hanging out in a bar and grill.

On his way back to his table in the window he was intercepted by Scotty Casteven, who was sipping a soft drink in the back

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corner of the bar during a lull in activity. Auburn wondered if Casteven had just overheard his half of the phone conversation.

"What does it look like, Officer?" he asked. "A stickup, or just some psychopath?"

"We're still checking. There wasn't any cash in her purse. You saw the bullet hole."

A glass-fronted cabinet next to the side entrance was crammed with every imaginable kind of green fish—figurines in china, wood, plaster, and plastic, coffee mugs, bottle openers, key-chain guards, a small pillow, a large light bulb, a electrified singing rubber bass mounted on a plaque.

Casteven shook his head and looked at the floor, which needed a good scrubbing. "It's pretty scary, you know? Your neighbor getting blown away right across the street.

"We had some pretty rough stuff going on when we lived in the Drysdale District, but that was just break-ins—kids with crowbars. Did they ever catch those guys that held up the grocery here last winter? Highmore swore it was the same guys both times."

"That case is still open," said Auburn, winging it. "Have you ever had any trouble like that here?"

"Not yet." Casteven rapped on the bar for luck.

"Do you own the building?"

"Oh no. Lease."

"Your business seems to be good."

"Don't you believe it. My business is rotten. I can't compete with the fast food places across the river, or the bars over there that cater to the neurosurgeons and the stockbrokers from downtown." He finished his drink and filed away the empty can under the bar. After a glance toward the dining room, he assumed a more confidential air. "When my wife died, I lost my bartender and cashier. And I have to pay Darla a lot more than she'd get downtown because the old soaks and deadbeats that hang out in this place would rather blow their Social Security checks on booze and cigarettes and lottery tickets than leave tips."

"I'll keep that in mind," said Auburn. "Is it just the two of you all the time here?"

"My brother-in-law Greg takes over the bar a little after three, when he gets off his other job, and he stays till eleven. We shut down the kitchen at eight, and that's when Darla and I knock off. We're closed Sundays."

Darla sang out, "One country up and a side of Murphy, no dash." Casteven cinched his apron tighter around his ample middle and went back to the grill.

In spite of the proprietor's grim report, the place seemed to be

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filling up for the lunch hour. A group of six East Indians dressed as workmen came in together and took adjoining tables. An elderly man, his features blurred by age like the face on a well-worn coin, sat down at the table next to Auburn's. Obviously a regular, he put on a pair of reading glasses and studied a morning paper he'd brought with him instead of the menu. His hands were bony and gnarled like those of a retired plumber, the nail of the left thumb permanently cloven.

Darla appeared at Auburn's side. "You working up an appetite for lunch? Our special on Thursdays is Cajun-style chicken giblets and rice."

Auburn already knew that from the slate over the lunch counter. At the very mention of the word "Cajun," his stomach performed the preliminary steps of a war dance. He chose Salisbury steak, which, although sometimes scarcely worth the effort of chewing, is hard for even a novice chef to ruin.

Time passed. Auburn was so absorbed in his watch on the empty house across the street and his attention to the pulse of life around him that he didn't even realize that he'd gone through his soup, salad, and main course until Darla swept away his empty plates. "How we doing here? How about some dessert? The peach cobbler's fresh today."

"Just some more coffee, thanks." Glancing yet again across the street, he saw a pickup truck pulling into Ida Blanford's driveway and canceled the order. He paid his check at the cash register and left all his change from a ten and a five on the table, partly because of what Casteven had said about tips and partly because he expected to spend more time later at The Green Fish.

By the time Auburn got across the street, the driver of the truck, a lanky man in his late thirties, had mounted the bank and was staring down at the spot where Ida Blanford's body had been found.

"Mr. Blanford?" Auburn showed identification.

"Yes, sir." Wearing a housepainter's cap with the visor turned backwards, sunglasses with small round lenses, and time-tattered camouflage fatigues, Blanford looked like an alien in a low-budget sci-fi flick made in the 1960's. Underneath these trimmings he had a crew cut and a square, matter-of-fact face.

"We talked on the phone earlier."

"I was going to call you from the house."

"Have you been downtown to the mortuary?"

"Oh, yes." Blanford shook his head as if to dispel the grim recollection. "That's where they found her, huh? I can remember standing down there throwing rocks in the river when I was about a

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year and a half old, and Aunt Ida yelling at me to get out of the mud." He stared unseeingly out over the water through the midday haze.

"Do you know if she'd had any kind of trouble lately with neighbors, vandals . . . ?"

"If she did, she didn't tell me about it. What I can't understand is what she was doing outside here after dark."

"She may not have been outside when she was killed. Would she have been likely to let anybody in the house that she didn't know?"

"Not unless they forced their way in. Caution was her middle name." He turned to face the house. "Look at those lightning rods. And I'm sure you saw the smoke alarms and carbon monoxide detectors all over the inside."

He took out a ring of keys, the same bunch Auburn had found in the dead woman's purse, which Stamaty had evidently handed over to him. "I better check inside and make sure everything's okay. She kept a lot of money upstairs. Whoever shot her could have made a real haul if they used these keys instead of just cleaning the cash out of her purse."

They climbed down from the levee to the sidewalk. "This was prime real estate when my grandfather built the house in the twenties," Blanford said. "And there wasn't any saloon across the street back then, either."

"Did your aunt ever have any trouble with the people over at The Green Fish?"

"I wouldn't say trouble. Mostly she acted like the place wasn't even there. She used to complain about the noise around closing time, especially on Saturday nights. And the lines waiting for green beer at six o'clock in the morning on St. Patrick's Day."

They went through the gate with the squeaky hinges and up the walk. "When was the last time you saw your aunt alive?"

"We had dinner here a week ago Sunday—my wife and I and our two kids."

"You said you and your sister are the only living relatives?"

"Yes, sir."

"So you're probably the only heirs?"

"I guess so." The thought didn't seem to distress him unduly.

Once inside the house, Blanford took off his cap and slid his sunglasses up to the top of his head. He cast a wary and perhaps now a proprietorial eye here and there as they moved through the immaculately kept rooms. At the foot of the front stairs he got out the keys again. "I haven't been allowed upstairs since I was about six," he said, "but I remember exactly where she kept her money."

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He led Auburn to Ida Blanford's bedroom and on into a windowless alcove fitted out as a dressing room. Here, concealed by a wall hanging, was a squat antique safe with the manufacturer's name splashed across the front in fancy script. Without hesitation, Blanford selected a key and opened the safe. Except for a few papers, which didn't include a will, the safe was empty.

"There ought to be a lot of cash here," he said, moderately agitated. "She inherited a couple million from my grandfather—he owned a brass foundry, Kingmark Castings. And she used to lend money to people starting up in business—young doctors, lawyers . . . she even staked me when I started up my construction business."

"Seems like a tough racket for an elderly lady to be in."

"You didn't know my aunt Ida. She could stir her tea with one hand and whip a tiger with the other. You get like that after teaching seventh and eighth grades in an inner-city school for about forty years. She'd still be at it if her eyes hadn't gone out on her. Glaucoma and a bunch of other stuff."

"Where did she conduct her business with these people she lent money to?"

"Right down in the front room. Always late in the evening. She tried to keep it hush-hush. I told her a thousand times she could get higher interest with better security if she just put that cash in the savings and loan. But she said the savings and loan people already had too much of her money. My wife thinks lending money at low interest was just her way of helping people who were in a bind but wouldn't take charity."

"But surely these loans weren't cash transactions?"

"Oh yes they were. And she kept the cash right in here, along with the IOUs. Anyway, she did when I was a kid, and Aunt Ida was one of those people who never change anything from one year to the next except their clothes. My Dad used to say she could never bring herself to do anything for the first time."

"Would she have had jewelry in here?"

"She never wore any. Teachers weren't allowed to wear jewelry when she started out, and she never changed that either."

"Okay. Let's not touch anything else here. I need to get an evidence technician back on the scene. Your aunt was evidently killed inside the house and then dumped on the riverbank to make it look like a street killing. Who besides you would have had access to the house or would have known about the safe? A boyfriend?"

Blanford grunted. "If she had a boyfriend, that would be the biggest revolution since bottled beer."

They found the name of Ida Blanford's lawyer in her address

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book downstairs. Blanford arranged by phone to meet the lawyer immediately and took off, leaving the keys with Auburn. After reporting the latest developments to Lieutenant Savage, Auburn went back to The Green Fish.

By now the place was getting to be a bit too familiar. The heavy smell of grease and fried onions, the cracked sugar bowl at the cash register where patrons could drop pennies they received in change, the squeaky place in the floor on the way to the restrooms. Scotty was busy behind the bar, where nobody was paying attention to the talk show on the large-screen TV. Darla was apparently taking a break in a back room. The dining room was practically deserted. Auburn sat at the same table in the window and resumed his watch on the street.

Darla eventually reappeared, plied him with more coffee, and asked if he was making any progress with the case. When Kestrel, the evidence technician, arrived back at the scene to go over the house, Auburn went across the street just long enough to give him the keys and confer with him briefly.

A little before three o'clock, a fresh flurry of activity on the levee told him that something was happening down by the water. A motley gang of neighborhood children, probably bored to death after only a week or so of summer vacation, had been drawn to the scene of action as surely as flies to spilled ice cream. Auburn crossed the street again.

There wasn't enough open water within the city limits to justify a standing team of river investigators under the Department of Public Safety, much less the purchase and maintenance of the necessary equipment. But Fire and Rescue had both the equipment and trained underwater investigators. Three men, two of them in diving gear, were working in a small motor launch just opposite the point where Ida Blanford's body had been found. By the time Auburn reached the top of the levee, the kids were already down at the edge of the water. "You gonna use radar?"

"You mean sonar," said one of the men from Fire and Rescue. "I think we can manage without it. The river isn't that deep here. Your favorite hoop star could walk across the bottom without getting his wig wet."

Auburn waved to the men in the boat and watched while they staked out the area under investigation, laid down pattern lines of yellow polypropylene rope, and began methodically exploring the river bottom by touch and with magnetic grapnels. Since they weren't under his orders and obviously knew exactly what they were doing, he soon went back to his table at The Green Fish.

He now had the dining room almost entirely to himself, but the

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bar trade was picking up as people got off work. In the business district north of the river, the posh bars would be having happy hour for people wearing silk shirts and handmade shoes. Here in The Green Fish, the men and women hunched over their drinks at the bar were palpably blue collar workers and practitioners of the manual trades. Pace Street was parked solid, mostly with panel trucks and pickups. A big Allied Bell truck with an overhead hydraulic platform stood near the corner.

Since there was nothing to see across the street, Auburn, with yet another cup of coffee before him, turned his attention to the people around him. The atmosphere seemed to have undergone a subtle change. A man who was a stranger to Auburn, a tall curly-haired blond, was tending bar. That would be Scotty Casteven's brother-in-law Greg. He had a diamond in each earlobe, but he wore no rings.

Casteven was busy at the dishwasher and Darla was helping at the bar and the cash register. It was obvious that relations between the two men were strained. When they communicated at all, it was in monosyllables, and their tone was stuffy, if not positively hostile. On the other hand, the chemistry between Darla and the new bartender, Greg, evidently went far beyond that of mere co-workers.

Were there hidden alliances here, ancient enmities, smoldering resentments? Or did the electricity in the air stem from the murder of Ida Blanford? A fatal drama had been played out within a stone's throw of the bar and grill. The impression was growing on Auburn that somebody here knew more than they were telling about the murder across the street—that the solution to the whole thing might lie right here if only he could penetrate beneath the surface.

He became so absorbed in that puzzle that, even when he saw Kestrel and the divers holding a lengthy conference on the levee, he didn't go outside. But that was partly because the TV crew from Channel 4 had just arrived back on the scene.

Hours passed. The radio station started repeating R&B records that Auburn had sat through that morning. Evidently the dining room did little business in the evening hours. At five fifteen, the only patrons having dinner were two women with bulging shopping bags stowed under their table. In one of the two booths on the windowless side of the dining room, two college kids with his-and-hers spiked hair were lingering over soft drinks and wearing out their welcome. Auburn ordered Salisbury steak again.

He felt so isolated in his nook in the window that, when his cell phone rang, he answered right there instead of seeking more privacy.

"Where in the world are you, Cy?" asked Lieutenant Savage.

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"Still at the scene of the Blanford homicide, tying up a few loose ends."

"Well, you must be well camouflaged. Even Kestrel of the hundred eyes couldn't find you. Have you talked to Dollinger and Krasnoy?"

"Not since this morning."

"Then you're about three days behind. Kestrel found fresh bloodstains on the basement floor in the victim's house. And the divers from Fire and Rescue struck gold."

Auburn lowered his voice slightly. "They found the weapon?"

"They found the weapon and more, nicely preserved in a waterproof plastic bag. Are you ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be."

"Okay, first we've got an old Colt .38. Recently fired, one chamber empty. No ballistics match yet, but that's the caliber of the slug they took out of Blanford's chest. Not registered with any local agency. Next we've got a pair of leather work gloves. The right one shows what looks like powder burns. Chemistry tests are in progress. Both gloves have bloodstains, the same type as the victim."

"What about latent prints?"

"Kestrel's still waving his magic wand over the stuff, but no fingerprints so far. But there's something almost as good—a wadded-up strip of adhesive tape with the name Johnston printed on it in indelible marker. And on the sticky side there's another name, also in black marker but in reverse, like it was picked up from whatever the tape was stuck on. That name is Rakovy." He spelled it.

"Now here's the kicker, Cy. Rakovy was the maiden name of Maria Casteven, the late wife of your witness at The Green Fish tavern across the street from Blanford's house. The only Rakovy listed in the current city directory is a Gregory J., who works for Allied Bell as a lineman and troubleshooter."

As Auburn furtively twisted sideways in his seat for a glimpse of the man behind the bar, his heart skipped a beat. At least, he felt something like a blow from a child's fist in the middle of his breastbone. Before speaking again, he covered his mouth with his hand, as if he thought Greg Rakovy—who wasn't even looking his way—could read lips.

"I'm pretty sure I have the subject in view as we speak."

"You are? Where in this world are you calling from, Cy? It sounds like a shopping mall."

"I'm at The Green Fish."

"And you think Rakovy is there?"

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"Pretty sure," Auburn said again.

"Well, can he hear you? What are you doing, playing poker with him?"

Even though the sight of people talking on cell phones in public places had become so commonplace that the few patrons around him were ignoring him completely, Auburn saw fit to mumble through a heavily veiled account of his current position and the grounds on which he believed that the number one suspect in the murder of Ida Blanford was the second-shift barman at The Green Fish.

"Okay, Cy," said Savage at length. "I'm trusting you to play this one by ear." Auburn waited until Rakovy was at the back end of the bar running a batch of glasses through the steamer before he approached him and showed identification.

"Mr. Rakovy?"

"Help you?"

"I wonder if you'd mind answering a few questions?"

The bartender stared at him with dead-fish eyes in a deadpan face. "What about?"

"I'm sure you know we had a shooting death across the street last night. Were you here at work last evening?"

"Till eleven."

"Is there somewhere we could talk privately?"

"Not right now. Unless you want to get me lynched." Patrons at that end of the bar were watching and listening as well as they could over the hubbub of voices and the relentless din of the TV. Two of them were clamoring for refills.

"I imagine Scotty would take over for you for a few minutes."

Rakovy bridled, now frankly hostile. "So who died and left you in charge?"

Remarks like that usually got Auburn's blood flowing, and sometimes prompted him to retaliate in kind. But, conscious of the increasingly attentive audience, he was determined to do things exactly right.

"This is a homicide investigation, sir," he said. "You were on or near the scene around the time of the shooting. That makes you a material witness." Auburn kept his voice quiet and steady, almost amiable—but not quite. "If you don't want to talk here, we can go downtown to headquarters—that's up to you. But I'm not going to go away, so you might as well get it over with."

By this time Casteven had appeared to see what the commotion was all about. He took over behind the bar while Auburn and Rakovy adjourned to a stuffy back room where full and empty beer kegs were stacked beside a walk-in freezer.

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Auburn first verified that he was talking to Gregory J. Rakovy and recorded his address and phone number. Rakovy worked full-time for the telephone company and (for the past eight months) part-time at The Green Fish. He had left immediately after locking up at eleven P.M. the night before and had gone straight home to his apartment and to bed, since he had to get up at five thirty to go to his other job. He lived alone. He hadn't heard or seen anything unusual across the street at Ida Blanford's house, and he denied being acquainted with her.

"Have you ever been inside her house? Ever talked to her? Out on the street, on the phone? Ever have any contact with her by mail?" Rakovy gave unqualified negative answers to all these questions. Auburn avoided saying anything that might tip him off to the fact that the gun and other articles had been recovered from the river bottom.

Had Ida Blanford ever been inside The Green Fish? Did Rakovy know Ida's nephew Dale? Had anybody at The Green Fish had any association with either of the Blanfords? No, no, no. By now Rakovy's face was set in a disdainful smirk. The oppressive heat from the freezer condenser and the sour fumes from the empty kegs were making Auburn sick.

On his way to his car he took a long look at Rakovy's truck. Because he didn't yet have probable cause for search and seizure, he confined his attention to inspecting it from the sidewalk. Then he climbed the levee for another view of the spot where Ida Blanford's body had been found. Although it was still broad daylight, the shadows were gathering under the sycamores and lights were coming on in the apartment buildings across the river. A cool evening breeze rippled the water and carried a vague threat of rain.

Auburn didn't sleep very well that night, probably because of all the coffee he'd put down at The Green Fish. But he was at his desk before eight thirty the next morning, shuffling through background probes on Ida Blanford and the people he'd talked to yesterday. The deceased had a distinguished history as an elementary school teacher and later, when her vision began to fail, as a volunteer tutor in a literacy program. And she had indeed been a woman of vast wealth. But her moneylending activities had never come to the attention either of law enforcement authorities or of the other agencies and services that participated in the surveillance system.

Her nephew Dale's construction company was operating in the black and had a favorable rating with the Better Business Bureau. Fred Shannoy, the playboy fisherman, and Darlece Fontaine, the

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waitress at The Green Fish, had so far kept on the right side of the law. Melvin J. Casteven was deeply in debt to two credit card companies and a local savings and loan. Gregory J. Rakovy had a long history of frequent job changes and had incurred several fines for minor infractions of traffic laws.

Stamaty had sent Auburn a preliminary autopsy report from the coroner's office across the street in the courthouse. A single .38-caliber slug, fired almost at point-blank range, had penetrated Ida Blanford's right ventricle and vena cava, producing a massive and rapidly lethal internal hemorrhage. Routine tests had shown powder burns on both her hands, probably sustained as she struggled with the killer. Anyway she hadn't shot herself through the heart and then tucked the gun in a plastic bag and tossed it into the river. The bullet and the gun had already been delivered by police courier to the regional ballistics lab.

No member of the public had come forth to report any unusual activity around Ida Blanford's house on Wednesday night.

Auburn went up to Kestrel's lab under the skylights to view the rest of the evidence for himself. Kestrel took a red plastic box marked "Biological Hazard" out of a locked cabinet, and after donning a pair of rubber gloves, he laid out its contents in a neat row on a sheet of clean paper. The resealable plastic food bag in which the other articles had been found was made of heavy-duty opaque polyethylene with a metallic sheen; it was jumbo-sized, big enough to hold a ham or a whole turkey.

The strip of white adhesive tape with "Johnston" lettered on one surface and the negative of "Rakovy" on the sticky side had been stretched out flat and mounted on a sheet of clear plastic. The blood on the leather work gloves had turned the color of chocolate syrup. The gloves were generic, worn, and untraceable. According to Kestrel, intensive examinations for trace evidence had turned up only the usual nonspecific particulate and microscopic garbage.

"I hear you found bloodstains in the basement."

"Back near the furnace. Nothing much to see except a spot where the dust had been wiped up, but it gave chemical traces of blood, same type as the victim. So did this." He opened a folder and showed Auburn a sheet of paper that had been tightly wadded and then partly smoothed out again. Besides bloodstains, it bore traces of grit and dust. "Found this in the crawl space under the back porch. He must have used it to wipe the blood off the floor."

Auburn examined the paper. One side was blank. On the other was printed, under the logo of a firm called Arco-Net Security

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Limited, a standard work contract to install an electronic security system. None of the blanks had been filled in, and the paper appeared to be a photocopy of an original document.

"I didn't see any loose papers in that basement," said Auburn. "This must be something the killer had with him. Has anybody checked on this company?"

"Not yet. I'm still putting my report together."

"How can I get a photocopy of this form?"

"I'll put it in a transparent sleeve."

Doing his own Web search, Auburn found that Arco-Net was still in business but had dropped its local franchisee three years ago. Probably the murderer had used the blank contract form to gain admittance to Ida Blanford's house on the pretext of giving a sales pitch or preparing an estimate for an electronic security system.

Premeditated murder seemed unlikely. According to her nephew, Ida was a gutsy character. She might have put up a fight, forcing the robber to use a weapon he'd brought along merely as a threat. But once he got hold of her keys, he went straight to the safe and cleaned it out without even bothering to search for loot elsewhere in the big house. Maybe he was somebody who owed Ida Blanford money. In that case, by removing his IOU along with a bundle of cash, he'd reduced the risk that he'd be counted among the suspects.

Dale Blanford presumably wasn't the killer, since his aunt would have recognized him in spite of her visual impairment, and the ruse about the security system would have been unnecessary. Yet Dale knew about both her safe and her weakness for security devices. And he admitted that she'd lent him money; he didn't say he'd ever paid it back.

None of the neighbors had reported seeing any visitors or unusual activity at the house. That could mean the killer had arrived after dark. If he parked down the street and went to the back door, nobody on the street or at The Green Fish would have seen him entering the house. He evidently had something with him that had been marked with Rakovy's name, probably a toolbox in which to carry away the loot, but that didn't prove he was Rakovy.

Auburn found eighty-one Johnstons in the metropolitan telephone directory. He decided to assume, for the time being, that the alternative name on the tape had been chosen at random. After spending some time in Records consulting a collection of old city directories, he made a call to Pittsburgh and another to the local office of Allied Bell. That second call led to a personal visit to the phone company, which he made on foot.

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The day was cloudy and breezy, cooler than yesterday. The air smelled like rain. After leaving the Allied Bell offices, Auburn returned to headquarters just long enough to prepare an application for search and arrest warrants and the necessary affidavits, and then took them across the street to the courthouse.

By eleven thirty he was back at The Green Fish, where he found the table in the window vacant just as if it had been reserved for him. Nothing much had changed. Scotty and Darla were still chanting their enigmatic antiphons and responses above the mutter of voices and the squawk of the radio speakers. The special today was codfish Creole, but the place smelled exactly the way it had yesterday.

The Blanford homicide had been a featured item on the TV news and in the morning papers. Some of the regulars obviously recognized Auburn and did double takes on seeing him back again at the same table. Yesterday he'd been a stranger, an anomaly in this milieu. By now he was becoming absorbed into it, was almost a regular himself. When a juvenile diner accidentally tipped a full glass of water onto the floor, Auburn was on the spot, helping with the mop from behind the serving counter before Darla got there.

"We're going to have to put you on the payroll, Officer," she said. "You going to try the codfish today? This time yesterday it was still swimming around in Chesapeake Bay."

"I think I'll stick with the Salisbury steak."

"You want that with soup and salad again?"

"Just coffee today, please."

There was nothing much to see across the street. Ida Blanford's Victorian revival house stood as it had for decades, stodgy and aloof. Only a strand of yellow tape caught in a hedge showed that anything unusual had happened there lately. And inside The Green Fish, life went on according to the usual routine as well.

The group of East Indians came in for lunch again, followed shortly by the retiree with the smashed thumb. They sat at the same tables as yesterday, ate the same food. Then the crowd in the dining area gradually thinned out again, so that by half past two Auburn almost had the place to himself. At a few minutes before three, Patrolman Fritz Dollinger entered in plainclothes and took one of the stools at the lunch counter.

Things were already picking up at the bar when Greg Rakovy came in from the back room, tying on a short black apron. He cast a quick eye over the dining room and seemingly made a point of not noticing Auburn.

When Auburn took his check to the cash register, Scotty Casteven interrupted the daily chore of cleaning the grill to take

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care of him. Auburn waited until he had his change to make the pinch. "Melvin Casteven," he said, so quietly that only Dollinger and Casteven himself could hear him, "I have a warrant for your arrest on a charge of first-degree murder. There may be other charges as well. You have the right to remain silent . . ."

Casteven didn't try to bluff, he didn't bluster, he just caved in. By the time Auburn finished reciting the familiar formula, his knees had turned to jelly and his face was the color of barley soup. Dollinger stepped into the gap in the counter, prepared to hold him up if necessary. Casteven was stout, but Dollinger was stouter.

"Hey, Darla," said Casteven, his voice hoarse and shaky, "I need to go downtown with these men. Close the dining room. And call Kriegel's before four fifteen and cancel that meat order." He didn't say anything to Rakovy.

After they left the bar and grill, Auburn looked back to see Darla staring in bewilderment through the window with the picture of the big fish while she mechanically pocketed the tip he'd left and wiped the table with a cloth.

"First we're going upstairs to look around your place," Auburn told Casteven. He waited to serve the search warrant until Casteven had unlocked the door to the stairs leading to the apartment over The Green Fish. The apartment was a dump, the typical living quarters of a widower who worked about sixty hours a week. Only the kitchen was more or less presentable, probably because Casteven ate all his meals down in the restaurant. They didn't find Ida Blanford's money.

"Okay," said Auburn, "now let's go back downstairs and see what's in your freezer that you didn't want the meat man from Kriegel's to find tomorrow morning."

"Hold on a minute," said Casteven. "You can't go poking around in there without a food-handler's card from the Board of Health."

"We're going to risk it. I worked at a deli when I was in high school. I know all about freezers. And freezer bags."

Buried under cuts of beef and pork they found a bag just like the one the divers had brought up from the river, only this one was stuffed with money. Dollinger spent the entire time it took them to get downtown counting it. There was over thirty thousand dollars, mostly in large bills. Dale Blanford would no doubt be pleased to learn that his aunt's outstanding promissory notes were there too.

When they arrived at headquarters, they took Casteven directly to an interrogation room, euphemistically styled "Conference A," on the second floor. At the risk of throwing the central air-conditioning out of adjustment, Auburn opened one of the big

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frosted glass windows, as he often did at this time of year. Dollinger stood at attention just inside the door like a sentry, even though his main function there was to serve as an official witness.

"Please make yourself comfortable, sir," Auburn told Casteven. He was always scrupulously polite to persons under arrest. It looked like the prisoner was planning to stand mute. They didn't need a confession to make the charges stick, but Auburn hoped to get some more details before he turned the case over to the prosecutor's office. He'd already given Casteven the statutory warnings, but he gave them again.

"I'm going to remind you that you're entitled to have a lawyer here before you say anything. But once you have legal representation, the city will have it too, in the form of an assistant prosecutor. And then those two lawyers will take over the case and decide your future between them."

Casteven sat with his bulky frame huddled on the edge of his chair like a little boy caught stealing apples. His dominant emotion seemed to be shame rather than fear. But clearly he was skeptical that Auburn had any other motive than the desire to see him convicted and sentenced. And Auburn knew that nothing he could do or say would convince this man of his genuine compassion, or persuade him that he enjoyed this part of his job about as much as Casteven enjoyed scraping burnt grease off the grill.

"I'm going to put my cards on the table," he said. "Most of them anyway. I'm sure you know that the divers brought up the gun and the gloves from the river where you threw them."

Casteven looked as if he were going to make a last-minute effort to deny everything, but something about Auburn's businesslike tone apparently told him it wouldn't work.

"You don't need to say a thing if you don't want to," Auburn assured him again. "Let me tell you what I think happened. Your business has been going down for years, along with all the other businesses in the neighborhood. And things only got worse when your wife died and you had to decide between struggling along without her and hiring some backup help. Getting your brother-in-law to work for you took off some of the workload, but it also cut your net income even further."

A gentle breeze from the direction of the river stirred forms on the table and cobwebs in the corners. They could hear the piping of dozens of birds in the trees around the courthouse half a block away.

"From your apartment you had a view of Ida Blandford's house across the street. You saw people visiting her in the evening—

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couples, individuals—and these obviously weren't social visits. Probably you could see her talking to them in her front parlor. Maybe you even saw her go upstairs and take her keys out of her purse and unlock her safe—"

The look on Casteven's face provided full confirmation of Auburn's surmise.

"Day after day you watched that going on, and day after day you tried to figure out how to get your hands on that money. You saw that she was concerned about security, so you decided to pretend to represent a company that installs electronic burglar alarm systems." Casteven's eyes opened wider and he seemed to be having trouble breathing.

"You figured if she couldn't see well enough to drive, she probably wouldn't recognize you as the guy from the bar and grill across the street, especially since she avoided your place like a leper colony. Probably you thought if you could once get inside her house you could jam a window latch or figure out some other way to fix it so you could slip in from the back some Sunday morning while she was at church.

"According to the phone company's records, you called her last Friday evening, and again on Monday. And Wednesday night you turned up at her place, didn't you, by appointment? Greg Rakovy's truck was parked on Jardine last night for hours, and it's parked there again today. After dark it would have been easy to climb up in the back and borrow his toolbox."

Casteven shook his head and spoke for the first time since they'd entered the room. "Hard hat. And a pair of gloves."

Dollinger sat down and started taking notes.

"Okay, his hard hat. And you put a piece of tape over his name and wrote a fake name on it. And you put on his gloves so you wouldn't leave fingerprints anywhere, and took along an old revolver just in case—"

"I never owned a gun in my life," said Casteven. "And I never fired one in my life, either. It was *her* gun. Something I said or did when I was down in the basement must have tipped her off. Anyway she went upstairs for a minute and when she came back she was pointing this big old cannon right in my face. I freaked out because she was blind as a bat and her hands were shaking. I tried to take the gun away from her and she shot herself. That's what happened, and even if you bring a hundred prosecutors in here, it was still an accident."

"No, sir. A homicide that occurs during the commission of a felony offense is automatically first-degree murder. That's how the law reads, and that's how your arrest warrant reads. This happened

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around—what, eight or nine o'clock Wednesday evening?"

Evidently alarmed by what Auburn had just said, Casteven clammed up again.

"You found her purse, got her keys, and opened the safe. You probably waited until Rakovy closed up for the night before you went across to the bar and grill and got a big, resealable plastic freezer bag to stow the cash in. And later that night you moved the body and the purse to the riverbank. Your idea was obviously to conceal the fact that you, the killer, had ever been in the house."

At the word "killer," Casteven clamped his lips still more tightly shut.

"But then you decided to put the gun and the gloves in another freezer bag and throw them in the river. Why?"

Casteven shrugged and his eyebrows went up, but he said nothing.

"After all, the gun couldn't be traced to you. And you could have burned the gloves. Why throw them in the river and go to the additional trouble of sealing them up together in a waterproof bag? I'll tell you why. When you peeled the tape off Rakovy's hard hat you saw that his name had come off on the sticky side, and you decided to frame him for the murder you hadn't planned to commit.

"You and he obviously don't get along. Maybe you think you're paying him more than he's worth, and maybe you resent the fact that he hits it off a lot better with Darla than you do. Or maybe you just could never stand the guy. But at some point between the death of Ida Blanford and the moment when you tossed that bag in the river, you decided to make it look like Greg was the killer.

"There weren't any fingerprints on the stuff in that bag. How do you handle adhesive tape without leaving some partials somewhere? How do you take off a pair of gloves and stuff them in a plastic bag without leaving any prints on the bag?"

"I guess you might wear another pair of gloves," said Casteven, "which you don't have to get rid of because they don't have blood on them."

"But if you didn't expect the bag to be found, why worry about fingerprints at all?"

"Wouldn't I have been taking a pretty long chance that they'd even look for the gun in the river, let alone bring it up?"

"Not really. When Fire and Rescue dredged up that gun from the Karlowski shooting a couple of years ago, the papers made a big deal about how there are sandbars lying crosswise in the riverbed that catch debris and keep it from washing downstream until

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there's been a lot of rain. It looks to me like evidence of a frame-up, but it'll be up to the prosecutor to formulate the charges.

"Although the cash we found in your freezer is evidence that you robbed Ida Blanford, I want to remind you that the charge on which you were arrested was first-degree murder. And the evidence I showed the judge to back up my application for that warrant was the scrap of paper you used to wipe up the blood from the basement floor.

"That paper was a photocopy you made of the contract for the security system you had installed seven years ago at your old house at 808 Eversole. It was just a stage prop, and you figured it would be good enough to fool a woman who was legally blind. Before you made the copy, you whited out the information that had been written in the blanks and the signatures, but you missed the serial number—it's in red ink on the original document. When I called the home office of the security company in Pittsburgh, they identified you immediately as the person to whom that contract had been issued."

By the time Auburn and Dollinger had booked Casteven, dispatched him to the cells, placed the stolen cash under lock and key in the evidence room, and finished up most of the paperwork, it was almost seven P.M. They headed for the canteen in the basement at double time.

The entrees of the day—or what was left of them after hours of torment in a steam table—were Cajun-style shrimp delight and Salisbury steak.

SOLUTION TO THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

I saw her thumb slide very gently towards the safety catch. She didn't know much about guns, but she knew that much.

—Raymond Chandler

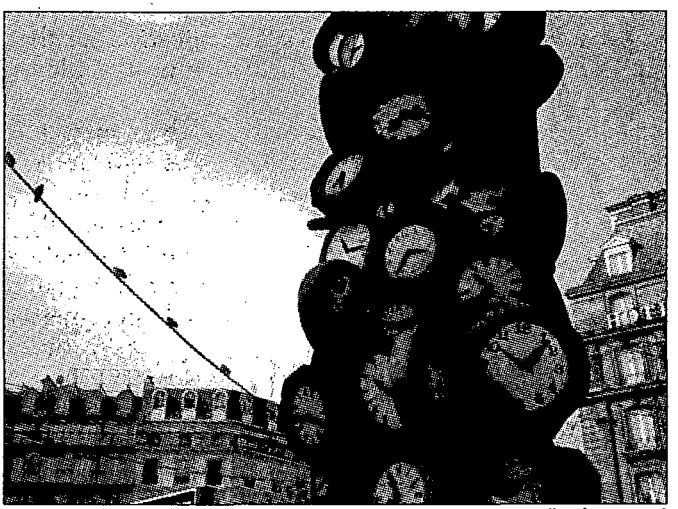
From "Trouble is My Business"

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MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



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Plenty of Time

We will give a prize of $25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "January/February Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the July/August Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 237.

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THE BOXING DAY KILLER

EDWARD D. HOCH

"This is Beth Valparaiso, live from Toronto Harbor. Now back to you, Glen." She waited until the red light blinked off, and disconnected her lapel mike.

"Good job, Beth," her cameraman said. "Take the rest of the day off."

"I wish I could, Foxy! Boxing Day is a holiday for normal people."

Foxy O'Dwyer usually worked with her on weekend remotes. Sometimes he tried to flirt a bit, but he was twice her age and hardly the romantic type. He grinned and replied, "Since when are TV people normal?"

December 26th was on a Sunday that year, so it would have meant a day off for most people even if it hadn't been a holiday. Beth had become accustomed to the Boxing Day holiday after moving to Toronto three years earlier to take a job as a local television reporter with CBC. She knew the post-Christmas holiday was not an occasion for prizefights but rather the remains of an old British tradition of rewarding servants and tradespeople with year-end gifts. When it fell on a Sunday it was never moved to the following day, as was Dominion Day, on the first of July. Boxing Day was always the day after Christmas, and like this day it was usually cold.

The Sunday papers had mentioned the Boxing Day murders, of course. For three years now, while the Christmas tree still glittered in Eaton Centre, gaily wrapped holiday boxes had been appearing around the city, containing the body parts of that year's victim. The first had been a homeless runaway from Thunder Bay, a nineteen-year-old girl named Norma Durban. The second had been an ex-convict named Larry Amsterdam. Last year the killer had moved up a notch on the social scale, targeting a gift shop owner named Earl Sydney.

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While Foxy stored his camera in the remote van and lowered its antenna, Beth walked to her own car across the street. They'd been at the harbor covering an overnight fire that had damaged some expensive yachts in dry dock on Lake Ontario. She wasn't surprised to see Detective Constable Matt Bates of the Metropolitan Toronto Police stepping out of his car down the street. He saw her at once and waved.

"You're up early," he said by way of greeting.

"I always get to work the holidays. The married ones are home with their families. How about you? You're a couple hours late for the fire."

He shrugged. "The Arson Squad's looking into it. Could have been kids with matches. But it's Boxing Day. Everybody works."

She knew immediately what he meant. "You don't think he'll do it four years in a row, do you?"

Bates shrugged. "What's to stop him?"

"Maybe he moved or died or got religion."

"Maybe." He checked his watch. "Got time for a coffee?"

"Sure." She glanced back to the remote truck and waved as Foxy pulled away. There was a Starbucks down the block, and they strode quickly toward it. Though the winter sky was clear, the temperature hovered around freezing, and a breeze off the lake made Beth thankful for the coffee. "Maybe by next Christmas I'll be married and they'll give me the holiday off."

"I hope so," he said with a little smile. "You've put in your time."

She'd bumped into Detective Bates several times during the year, and she sometimes wondered if the meetings were more than accidental. He was unmarried, she knew, and no longer living with the young woman who'd been his companion until recently. Some of the other women at the station considered his chiseled features handsome, and Beth supposed they were, in a way. After a brief discussion of the fire she asked, "Do you have any leads on the Boxing Day killer?"

"Some." He took a sip of coffee. "We're trying to figure out how he chooses his victims, and just when he kills them. The condition of the body parts indicates the murders probably take place on Boxing Day, just hours before the boxes start turning up."

"How ghastly! I don't even want to think about it."

"I'm working on a theory that he chooses his victims earlier in the year, but then waits till the holiday to kill them."

"He must be insane."

"Most serial killers are, even the ones who seem quite rational. After a string of killings, though, juries aren't likely to accept an insanity defense."

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"You have to catch him before you start talking about juries."

Bates nodded. "I know." He finished his coffee. "But if my theory is correct, the killer is known to his victims."

"How could one person know people as diverse as that? A teenage runaway, an ex-convict, a gift shop owner?"

"Drugs," he replied at once. "A drug dealer might have had them all as customers. Larry Amsterdam, the ex-con, was in prison for assault and robbery, but he'd had a drug arrest too."

"What about the others?"

Bates shrugged as he got to his feet. "Earl Sydney was gay, with lots of contacts around town. We've been checking them all for a year now."

"No connection with the first two victims?"

"None that we can find. How late are you working today?"

"Till four. They might use my segments on the evening news, but I don't have to be there."

"I'll bet the station is a dead place on holidays like this. Not much news unless there's another killing."

"The staff keeps busy. The sports guys all watch Sunday football on the Buffalo stations, and some of the news people usually have a poker game going."

"Really?"

"It's been known to happen."

"Maybe I'll drop by the station later."

"What for? Poker?"

He grinned. "Do I need a reason?" He took out a card and passed it to her. "That's my cell phone number. Call me if you need anything."

They left the Starbucks together and she waved to him. "See you later, Detective."

"Take care."

The Broadcast Centre between Wellington and Front Streets faced the vast Metro Toronto Convention Centre. It was conveniently connected to the array of underground walkways known as PATH that linked the buildings of downtown Toronto like the web of some giant spider. Beth was thankful for it on stormy winter days when she could cover the several blocks to City Hall or the Eaton Centre mall without setting foot outdoors.

The morning news was long ended by the time she returned from the fire scene. "Where've you been?" Glen Walker asked in a fatherly tone. He was the handsome grayhaired anchor of the morning and noon weekend shows. A few years back he'd

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co-anchored the nightly news until someone decided they needed a younger face.

"Coffee with Detective Constable Bates. He was down at the fire scene."

"Learn anything more?"

"Nothing. It might have been kids playing with matches."

"Arson?"

"That's the preliminary suspicion, but it's not Bates's department." She glanced around the newsroom. "Pretty quiet, even for a Sunday."

"The sports department has a poker game going till the American football games start at one." It was already nearly noon.

She poked her head in and found four of them seated around the small conference table. The ceramic Christmas tree that decorated it the previous week had been shunted aside to the top of a filing cabinet. Rich LeFavre, the weekend sports anchor, was dealing a hand of stud poker, and she could see a cluster of five-dollar bills for the ante. "We've got room for a fifth, Beth," Rich called out. "Always happy to take your money."

"Too rich for my blood," she told him. She'd mainly wanted to see who all was in there, and was a bit surprised that Hayes Merritt was one of them. Hayes was a big deal, the station's evening news anchor. She'd never seen him at the station on a Sunday, to say nothing of Christmas weekend.

Walker glanced up as she returned to the desk she shared in the newsroom. "No room for an extra?"

"You think I'm going to sit in on a stud game with Hayes Merritt? I don't see you in there."

"Afraid to take his money, Beth? He earns more than the two of us put together. Way more."

"And he's here on a Sunday afternoon, Boxing Day, instead of home with his wife and kids."

"We're all waiting. You know that. If a story breaks he'll be on camera for the evening news."

"Yeah," she agreed. It was like sitting around in a hospital waiting for an elderly uncle to die. Once they got the word, the newsroom would spring into action. Until then, there was stud poker and American football.

"Want to take Foxy and go over to Eaton Centre? Find out how people are spending Boxing Day?"

"Now there's excitement." She thought about it and suggested instead, "I should dig out the clips of the previous victims, just in case we need them."

"I think Merritt already has them lined up, but you can check it."

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She typed in the name of the first victim on her computer. *Norma Durban.* The dates sprang up on the screen: 6/10/01, 12/27/01, 12/28/01, 12/29/01, and every day into the new year. Then there were a few skips that gradually lengthened into weeks, then months. December 27th would have been the day the body parts were identified through fingerprints. That had been Beth's first Christmas in the city and she remembered the story all too well.

But she hadn't been here yet on June 10th of that year and she wondered how the dead girl had made the news that day. She brought up the tape and saw a familiar face. It was Constable Bates, leading three young ladies into the Dundas Street police station during a brief crackdown on women cavorting topless in the City Hall fountain. Their names were given and the middle one, her top suitably covered for television, was Norma Durban. The topless movement had been short-lived in downtown Toronto, more or less settled by the establishment of a "clothing optional beach" at Hanlon's Point on the west side of the Toronto Islands, near the small island airport. But Beth didn't remember any mention of Norma Durban's involvement in it.

She picked up the phone and dialed the cell phone number Bates had given her. "This is Beth," she said when he answered. "I wanted to ask you—"

He cut her off. "I'm on my way to your place right now. I'll be there in five minutes." His voice was gruff, all business, and she wondered what was up.

From the sports department came the sound of the American football game, and Beth knew without checking her watch that it must be one o'clock. The poker game would be put aside now for football, while they all waited for the news everyone expected.

As soon as Bates came through the station door she asked, "Has there been another killing?"

"I hope not. I'm here about that yacht fire you were covering."

It had almost slipped from her mind. "What about it?"

He slipped off his topcoat and draped it over a chair. "The arson investigators found something, a book of matches from this station." He slipped a photograph out of an envelope he was carrying.

She stared at a charred matchbook with the station's call letters clearly visible. "I never saw these and I've been here over three years. We don't give out matches any more. Hardly any businesses do, with the smoking bans."

"Who would know about them?"

She thought of the men in the other room. "Hayes Merritt, I suppose. He's been here longer than me. I'll get him."

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"He's here on a Sunday?"

"It's Boxing Day," she reminded him, as if he'd forgotten. "I'll get Hayes for you."

The weeknight news anchor left the TV set with some reluctance and followed her out to the newsroom. "What can I do for you, Sergeant?"

Bates showed him the photo. "The arson boys found this at the scene of the yacht fire this morning."

Hayes Merritt grunted. "We haven't had any of those around for five years, maybe longer."

"The arsonist might have dropped it, assuming it would be destroyed in the fire."

"Anyone might have dropped it. Believe me, Sergeant, we're not so desperate for news that we go around starting fires."

"By the time I got there the fire was out anyway," Beth said. "All we had was a talking head of me standing there."

Bates was still studying the picture. "No chance there's a box of these still around the station?"

"Not that I've seen in years." He headed back to the sports department.

Sergeant Bates smiled as he heard the sounds from the next room. "What are they doing, watching American football?"

Beth shrugged. "I guess so." Then she remembered her reason for phoning Bates. She showed him the film clip of the first Boxing Day victim after he'd arrested her.

"Yeah, I remember her. She told us at the time she'd come here to attend the university. It wasn't till after she was killed that we found out she was a runaway, if you can call a nineteen year old a runaway. Legally we couldn't force her to return to Thunder Bay."

"What about these other girls?"

"They were legitimate students. It was just a crazy college stunt. Durban hung around with them for a while but never attended classes."

"She must have been living somewhere, perhaps with her killer."

"That's what we thought, but we could never prove it. Then after the second killing we decided it wasn't a sex thing at all. Larry Amsterdam was a two-bit hoodlum who served a year in prison for assault and robbery. You've probably got a tape of that too somewhere. I was in on the arrest."

"What about last year's victim? Wasn't he a gay activist?"

"Earl Sydney? Nice guy. He had a gift shop down on Queens Quay and was president of the small business council. He wasn't that much of an activist, though."

"Was he living with someone?"

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"No, he lived alone. All three of the victims did, near as we can tell."

"Did you ever arrest him?"

Bates was puzzled by her question. "No. Why do you ask?"

"I hadn't realized the first two victims were people you'd arrested. Could there be a pattern there?"

He laughed at the thought. "What sort of pattern would that be?"

Beth shrugged. "Enemies of society, in the eyes of the killer. A girl who went topless, an ex-convict, a gay man."

But Bates wasn't buying it. "Someone like that wouldn't wait a year between victims."

"There could be a copy-cat killer with his own motives."

"All three were the work of the same killer. We never released details of the dismemberments, but they were all done the same way."

A cheer went up in the sports department and Beth said, "Maybe we've seen the end of it. Maybe there'll be no Boxing Day killer this year. Here it is after one o'clock and nothing's happened yet."

Sergeant Bates grunted and prepared to leave. "How late are you working today?"

"Till four—unless a big story breaks. I started at seven this morning."

"Suppose I come by at four to pick you up."

"Pick me up? I have my own car."

"I know. Maybe we could have a drink for the holidays."

Those words were about the last thing she expected to hear from Matt Bates. They'd had a friendly enough relationship over the past three years, but it was a business relationship only—the press and the police. Now, suddenly, he seemed to be inviting her out on a date.

"I . . . I don't know."

"Sure, why not?"

"All right," she agreed. "There's a little place in the Distillery District that'll be open today." She wrote down the address for him.

"Great! I'll see you there at four." He paused at the newsroom door. "If you go out on an assignment this afternoon, call me. Okay?"

"What?" she asked, not certain she'd heard correctly. But by that time he was gone.

Beth strolled into the sports department to watch the game. The

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station was showing an old Christmas movie and she couldn't blame them for choosing football instead. Walker and Merritt and LeFavre were all grouped around the TV monitor tuned to the Buffalo station, and she saw that Foxy O'Dwyer had joined them. All seemed convinced that nothing was going to happen this year. The killings were over.

She remembered her questions to Bates about the third victim and decided to check the files. It would have been done a year ago, of course, and surely any arrest would have been noted. There was only one file film for Earl Sydney, in the spring of 2003, addressing a luncheon of the small business council. Seeing it again, she remembered that the station had run it at the time of his murder. She shut off the monitor and went back to the football game.

It was nearly three o'clock when Glen Walker took a call and told her, "Beth, there's a truck skidded and overturned on the QEW in Mississauga, just past the Dixie Road exit. Take Foxy along and get some footage for six o'clock."

O'Dwyer grumbled and got to his feet. "I'd rather watch the end of the game. Come on, Beth. We can take the van."

She remembered her four o'clock date with Matt Bates. He'd said to phone him if she went out on assignment, but she figured she'd be back in time. "I've got an appointment after work. I'd better take my own car."

She followed O'Dwyer out of the Broadcast Centre parking lot, in the shadow of CN Tower, and onto the Gardiner Expressway, which became Queen Elizabeth Way. The expressway was noted for its heavy traffic, bound for Hamilton, Buffalo, and Niagara Falls, but on Boxing Day it was surprisingly light. They encountered only minor delays on the way to the accident. The sunny day had turned cloudy, though, and as their vehicles approached the overturned truck a light snow was falling. O'Dwyer raised the tower of their transmitter and Beth checked her makeup in the car mirror. Then she got the clip-on mike from the truck and found a likely police officer to interview. The driver of the truck and been taken to the hospital in an ambulance but his injuries did not appear severe.

Even on a slow news day the story didn't rate more than a few minutes. She thanked the officer and gave the mike back to Foxy. Her car was parked just behind the news van and as she opened the door he called to her. "Looks like your tire's flat, Beth."

Indeed it was. She cursed silently and reached for her cell phone. "I suppose most of the garages are closed today too."

"Do you have a spare?"

"Sure, but I'm not up to changing it myself in this weather."

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He smiled at her. "I can do it. Wait in the van, out of the cold."

"Thanks, Foxy. You're a doll."

He followed her into the van. "I'll need the key to your trunk."

She turned to hand it to him and a stark white odor seemed to blot out her vision. She had a fleeting memory of a childhood hospital stay, and then nothing.

Beth awoke gradually, trying to focus on what had happened. She realized at once that she was unable to move or speak. Her wrists and ankles were tied, and a piece of tape covered her mouth. She was lying on a rough blanket of some sort, and when she opened her eyes she could see the outlines of a dimly lit garage. A window was covered with a burlap sack, but she knew it was after dark.

Then Foxy O'Dwyer came into view. "You're awake. I didn't want you to wake up, but don't worry. I'll give you another dose so you'll sleep through it all."

She grunted and tried to speak through the tape, but only panicked noises came from her. Then she caught sight of a half dozen boxes of various sizes, piled on top of one another. Fully awake now, she tried to roll away from him.

He grabbed onto her leg and held her. "I didn't want it to be you, really I didn't! I spent the whole year hoping someone else would turn up. But there was nobody. A sacrifice had to be made, and you were the only one. Every year, on the day after Christmas, to keep the terrorists away. And it's worked, hasn't it? You'll be the fourth, and there'll be two more, if I can find them."

He was mad, insane, and he was going to kill her. Six, why six? And why her? She saw him take up the cloth again and douse it with chloroform. "I'm sorry, Beth," he said and stepped toward her. "Real sorry."

She kicked out at him, forcing him back for just an instant. Then the burlap-covered window exploded inward and a familiar voice shouted, "Police! Hands up!"

O'Dwyer cursed and dove toward her, and Matt Bates fired a single shot to bring him down.

It was ten o'clock that night before Beth saw Matt Bates again. They'd checked her out at the hospital and were sending her home when he appeared at the door of the examining room.

"What happened?" she asked at once. "Is he alive?"

"Just barely, crazy as a loon. He made a statement. I guess you'd call it a confession."

"How'd you know? How'd you find me?"

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"I had a hunch the killer might have you targeted. When I found that matchbook from your station I wondered if one of your co-workers might be the Boxing Day killer. The matches hadn't been available for years, but a station employee might have had some. And I noticed, as you did, that each of the victims had been seen on your TV news prior to their deaths. If you were the target, the fire might have been set to lure you out there. The killer would know you'd be sent for a fire report while everyone else was off. But with your cameraman along there'd be no chance to get at you. Not unless Foxy himself was the killer. When you didn't show up at four o'clock I checked with the station and found that you and Foxy were on assignment. I found your car with the flat tire, conveniently caused by Foxy, and figured out what had happened. I raced out to his house and found the station van in the driveway. I heard his voice from inside the garage and smashed in the window."

"He was apologizing, Matt, as he got ready to kill me! He said he needed six people and this year he couldn't find anyone but me."

"I realized it some time back, your connection with the three previous victims. He'd have taken you this morning at the fire scene if I hadn't happened along. I stuck close to you lately for that very reason."

"He said it was a sacrifice to prevent more terrorism."

"That's what it was in his crazed mind. One victim each year on Boxing Day, their names representing cities on each of the six inhabited continents. Durban from Africa, Amsterdam from Europe, Sydney from Australia."

"My name!"

"Of course. You were South America. Six continents, six victims, six boxes for the body parts." He paused and then said, "Come on, I'll take you home."

"Home, hell! Take me to the station. I'm the lead item on the eleven o'clock news!"

An hour later she sat there with Hayes Merritt at her side and stared at the camera. "Good evening. This is Beth Valparaiso, reporting live on the capture of the Boxing Day killer."

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BAD WEATHER

WILLIAM J. CARROLL, JR.

The body in the wall began to sag outward as the whole cave started to sink around me, so I didn't have time to pay it any final respects.

All I *did* have time for was a mad, semi-panicky scramble to the cave opening—and I made it—the mud walls oozing together behind me—just in time to feel the hurricane hit like the hammer of God.

Because this was, finally, the *real* Amanda—the real horrific deal—the night before being just a mild prelude—and I'd never seen anything like it.

Flying sheets of water and mud and vegetation flailing around me. The wind so fierce I had to crawl or be carried away. And the noise so loud I wanted to cry.

Some morning.

It was two hours until sunrise, and I couldn't see a thing, having dropped my flashlight back in the cave, but the good news was that whoever shot me wouldn't be around.

No one would.

So, aside from the hurricane, I was safe.

I slipped-slid down onto the rocks at the foot of the mud hill, where I got battered by the surging river, and fell I-don't-know-how-many-times, but somehow dragged myself around the headland to the swamp.

Where the wind was a micron less fierce, but where I couldn't find the trail back to the highway, because not only could I not see, nothing was as it had been.

So, with my head low, I stagger-walked in waist- to neck-deep water for what seemed like hours, until the water shallowed and I walked into a mangrove tree, a nasty curved branch jamming into my shoulder. That started it bleeding again, so I decided I was done for a while, and just hunkered down on the leeward side of the mangrove's trunk, closed my eyes, and waited.

Not thinking I was too old for this, because I'd never been young enough; not thinking I should have had second thoughts about

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coming to look for the body with the hurricane hovering just off the North Carolina shore, because the damn thing must have changed direction.

And not thinking about *who* might have shot me, as much as what to do about it.

Not that it was much of a wound—just a groove in the skin below the shoulder, but it stung and kept me angry. Angry enough to want to do something about it.

So, that's what occupied my thoughts until the storm passed and left me in a soft but persisting rain.

Which, in the relative calm, is when I got out my cell and made two calls.

The first, as I trudged back toward the highway, to the police, though I knew I wouldn't be a high priority on their list of things-to-do-when-a-hurricane-hits.

And then, when I was finally sitting in my rented Explorer, which had been rolled off the road and into a ditch, I made the second, to Scotty McKey.

Who'd started it all. Two days ago, at the Fort Bragg BOQ.

I had just recently returned from a wasted TDY to Bosnia, and I was a day into a two weeks' leave, which I was spending doing nothing whatever—and liking it. Scotty had left a message on my machine while I'd been away, and I'd intended to call him, but just hadn't gotten around to it.

There was a new waitress at the Officers' Club with whom I'd been semiflirting, and who for the moment had a lot of my attention. In fact, I'd been just about on my way to the club, with full-fledged flirting on my mind, and some wishful thinking for the days ahead, when Scotty called again.

"Virginiak, you cretin," he said, when I answered, "don't you *ever* return your calls?"

"Hey, Scotty, what's happening?"

"How're you doing pal?"

"I'm doing fine, Scotty," I said. "How are you?"

"I've done better."

"Where are you, man?"

"New place near Raleigh," he told me. "Cormier Memorial."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah," he said. "Been here a couple years now."

I felt like sudden death.

"It's a dump, actually," he went on, "but it's country, and better than most, you know?"

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"Uh-huh."

"Reason I called," he said, "I wonder if you could drop down to see me."

"Sure," I said. "I'm on leave right now, as a matter of fact. How about next week?"

"Look," he said, after a small hesitation. "I think you'd better come now. I don't know how I'm gonna be, you know? I have good weeks and bad." He laughed. "I may not even be *around* next week."

"You heading back west?"

"No," he told me with reluctance. "I'm kinda sick, you know?"

Oh Jesus, I thought.

"So," he said. "What do you think?"

What could I think? What else could I do?

I told him I'd be there first thing in the morning.

Which pretty much bollixed up my vague plans, but in a way it was the price of my being alive today, or being in one fully functioning piece, at least, so I paid it.

Made an early night of it, got up at dawn, gassed my rented Explorer, and then headed down toward Raleigh.

Remembering Scotty McKey—Captain Robert R. McKey—and Honduras, 1984.

We'd been stationed at a forward staging area, supporting Contra forces in Nicaragua. A mission that was a waste of material, time, and lives that embarrasses me now to even think about—but, we were there.

Scotty was a veteran chopper pilot, and myself an area security officer. We'd spent some long drinking nights together in sundry Tegucigalpa bars and had gotten to be pretty good friends.

As good as friends became in the Army, anyway.

But then, on a routine supply mission on which I'd gone as courier for some sensitive material, we took a partial hit from a SAM in the tail rotor and spent a miserable twenty minutes trying to get back across the border.

With the cockpit smoked up and the aircraft wobbling all over the place, it was a miracle Scotty kept the thing in the air as long as he did.

All the way, in fact, to the Rios Coco—where he had the kicker and me drop into the river; but with no open ground on which to land and no way of landing the thing safely anyway, Scotty tried just letting the aircraft down into the water—but the thing spun away from him at the last minute. The aircraft hit a rock, the main

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rotor breaking free and hard-dumping the chopper upside down on the river bank.

Breaking Scotty's back, and leaving him with a life without legs.

Because of other various related medical problems, he'd spent his life in a number of VA hospitals over the years. Though I'd visited with him from time to time, it never felt like I'd done enough.

I made it down to Raleigh the next day as promised and found Cormier Memorial easily enough, getting to the old ramshackle institution around noon. As VA nursing facilities went, I suppose, Cormier *was* better than most, but I can think of better places to be.

An ancient, wooden, rambling facility, it looked more like an old high school campus than a hospital.

I parked in a lot that was adjacent to an overgrown baseball field, nodded hello to some vets on wheels sitting on a shaded porch by the entrance, and after a bit of ducking in and out of corridors, found the critical care ward where Scotty McKey was bedded.

And, he didn't look the same.

Not at all.

When I first met Scotty McKey, he'd been in his thirties, and owned a large, well-sculpted body that had that male-model look to it. Six three or four, about a hundred and ninety pounds, tight skin the color of chestnuts. He sported a short afro back then and a big, ever-ready smile that he used a lot, with his dark eyes glittering, as he laughed a deep, infectious laugh over anything at all.

That had been in 1984.

Flash forward to 1991 to a VA hospital outside San Diego. Now in his early forties and wheelchair bound, with a huge upper body and withered little legs. His smile had been the same and his eyes still glittered. Only the laugh had lost some of its timbre.

And now, Scotty McKey, who'd saved my life, was lying on a high, narrow bed. His eyes, yellowed and dulled, were open wide and staring at me. His hair had gone gray and sparse, his dark skin had become patchy white, and his body shrunken.

He lifted a thin arm and gave me a wave as I approached, trying to keep the shock out of my face.

"Hey, buddy!" he said.

"Hey, Scotty," I replied, taking his slightly trembling hand to shake. "It's good to see you."

"Good to see you too," he told me.

I put myself on the edge of the bed next to him.

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He shook his head at me. "Can't believe you're still *in*."

"What else would I do?"

"Retire, for gosh sake. You got way more than twenty years in by now."

"Way more," I agreed.

"Lookin' at thirty?"

I shrugged.

He sighed. "I would'a never stayed in," he told me, but he didn't explain why.

A sharp stab of pain struck him suddenly, his body stiffened, sweat stood out on his forehead, his teeth clenched.

"Damn," he said, injecting himself. "Be okay in a minute."

And a minute later the Demerol hit and cleared the sharp creases that furrowed his face. Then he got to the point of my being there.

"Reason I wanted to see you," he explained. "A buddy of mine's gone missing."

"Oh?"

"Name's Steensen. Ralph Steensen. He was here himself up till about a year ago."

"He on wheels too?"

"No, but he had a screw or two loose. We called him Crash." He smiled. "I know him from Nam. He was a chopper pilot too."

"Uh-huh."

He shrugged. "Anyway, like me, he had no family, and since Nam, he's mostly just drifted around, but he'd always have some trouble and end up in one hospital or another. He was here, oh, about five years, I guess, before he left. He didn't want to go, but they closed the nut wing here, so he was history."

"Uh-huh."

"The VA had a place for him at this new hospital in Atlanta, but Crash didn't want that, so he just checked out and headed for the swamps. Ended up in this old cabin, outside a place called Polecat Springs, just south of Beauford."

"That's down near the coast."

"Not too far."

"But, you say he's gone missing?"

"Yeah."

He took some envelopes from the nightstand by his bed and showed me. They were addressed to a P.O. box, and had been returned to him with a NO FORWARDING ORDER ON FILE label attached.

"He wrote me a couple of times," Scotty continued. "Said he was doing good. Liked the swamps, liked living near the river. Liked

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being off by himself. Said he didn't feel like no nutcase anymore cause there weren't anybody around to make him *feel* like a nutcase." He waved the envelopes at me. "Then the letters started coming back."

"Those are almost a year old, Scotty."

"I know," he agreed.

"Maybe he's in some other hospital."

"Not a VA Hospital, 'cause I had the Red Cross check for me, and the VA stopped sending him his checks 'cause they started getting returned too."

"Maybe he just started drifting again, Scotty."

"Maybe."

"Or maybe . . ."

"Yeah," he nodded. "Maybe, but I gotta know."

Another shock of pain went through him, but he laid off the Demerol this time and just stood it.

"I take too much of this stuff now," he told me through gritted teeth. "It won't do me much good later when it's bad."

I didn't ask him how good he thought it was now. I just sat there and watched him hurt.

It was longer than a minute this time.

Finally, he relaxed enough to continue.

"Thing is," he told me in a whispery voice, "I—need to let him know. About my—about me." He smiled. "About a year and a half ago—I don't know when it was exactly—this insurance guy comes around here and offers us some term life insurance. We had to take a physical, and it wasn't exactly cheap, but it isn't as if guys like us here get a chance at life insurance every day, so I bought a policy, and so did Ralph. It was only for twenty-five thousand, but what the hell, you know?" He shrugged. "We named each other as beneficiaries."

"I see."

"So I—you know."

"I know."

"So he can collect."

"I get it, Scotty."

"I mean—maybe—whatever his problem is now, he could use the cash, you know?"

"Did you try the local cops?" I said.

"No," he replied. "Crash and cops mix like fire and gunpowder. I don't want to cause him any grief, you know? I mean, I want you to find him—but try and keep the cops out of it, okay?"

Right, I thought.

He pulled a folded map from the nightstand, opened it on his

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chest, and pointed. "Cabin's not on any road. But it's right here, by this waterway."

"You know this place?"

"He told me about it."

From the nightstand he handed me up an old Polaroid snapshot, saying, "That's him. That's Crash."

I looked and saw a wild-eyed, redhaired, full-bearded, middle-aged man, sitting on the front step of tiny, gray-boarded cabin, and looking cross-eyed into the camera.

"He sent me that last year sometime."

I nodded.

He nodded too, then smiled weakly. "They say I got six good months left, but the good part hasn't kicked in yet."

Right.

I put the map and the picture away and said, "Anything else I can do for you, Scotty?"

He shook his head and grinned. "You find Crash," he told me, "you've done a real job."

Which I began to get on with almost immediately, driving back to Fort Bragg, packing a bag, and then pointing the Explorer north and east on U.S. 64 to Polecat Springs.

Driving in a lashing rain that dogged me most of the way—a prelude, the radio informed me, to a hurricane named Amanda, which was just then raising hell off the Georgia coast. Not a long trip, but the weather dragged it out, so that I had a lot of time to think.

About friendships, their causes and obligations.

There was not a lot I *wouldn't* do for Scotty McKey, including wild-goose chasing in the storm of the century. But I'd somehow neglected knowing where he'd been the past two years, which left me feeling rather sloppy.

And I didn't like the feeling.

I got to Tarboro—north of where Polecat Springs showed on my map—around eight o'clock, too tired to do anything more than find a Motel 6, get a burger and fries for dinner, and get to bed.

I spent a lousy night of on-again, off-again sleep, full of cold-sweat dreams that left me when I woke at seven the next morning about as tired as I'd been to begin with.

And with that wild-goose-chase frame of mind I couldn't shake.

Men like Crash Steensen, vets with "problems" and no family, or even with family, had a tendency to disappear, and there was no finding them no matter how motivated the search.

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I *wanted* to find him, *really* wanted to, because Scotty McKey had never before asked me for anything, but the gone-for-good feeling I had about Steensen was running strong, and it felt like I was just going through the motions. Not the best frame of mind to start a search, but at least being conscious of it, I'd stay with it to the end.

So, feeling hopeless but determined, I hauled myself out of bed, got directions from the desk clerk, and put the Explorer on the road again, southwest.

To Polecat Springs, about twenty minutes from Tarboro, where I arrived in another downpour. I drove slowly through the tiny village of modest wood-frame homes, looking for the post office, which turned out to be a counter in the corner of the Polecat Springs General Store and Tattoo Emporium.

I stopped and got directions from the postmistress—a middle-aged woman, wearing jeans and a tube top, and sporting a variety of wildlife body art over her shoulders and chest and a flaming-red head of curly hair.

And she remembered Crash.

"Crazy-looking guy, sure," she said. "Come in here couple times last year."

"You haven't seen him since?" I asked.

"Nah. Not since way last fall," she told me. "Had a box, and came in to pick up his government check a few times, then—*whoosh*—never came back. Had to return the last couple checks that came for him and some other mail, 'cause he didn't pay the rental on the box."

"No forwarding address, then."

She dug out a ledger from under the counter, flipped a couple of pages, and said, "No forwarding or residence address. Box rental paid through November last year, but I've got a note here that I returned his November and December's VA checks, so the last I saw of him was probably October sometime."

I nodded, then showed her the map Scotty had given me, which she studied for a moment.

"Well, that's Fort Allen Road, anyway," she said. "Takes you right past the springs."

"The springs?"

She rolled her eyes. "Duh—like Polecat Springs?"

"Oh."

"Can't miss it, you going up that way."

I pointed to the spot where the cabin was indicated on the shore of the Tar River. "How about this place here?"

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"Oh, that's swampland, way past the springs, right along Nasty Creek."

"Nasty Creek?"

"Uh-huh."

"Polecat Springs?"

"Yup."

"Sounds inviting."

"I wouldn't know," she told me. "I never get out that way." She smiled at me and added, "There's nothing out there."

I smiled back at her. "Probably something."

"Like what?"

I nodded. "Well, thanks," I told her, and started out.

"Got a special this week on dirty birds," she said.

I looked back. "Dirty birds?"

She smiled broadly and pointed to her neck and the ring of pigeons she wore there, like a necklace.

I waved no thanks and said, "I'm saving my neck for dirty mice."

"Mice?" she said, sticking the tip of her tongue out at the corner of her mouth in a that-makes-me-sick way. "How weird is that?"

Right.

Sometimes, irony is as lost as a vegetarian in a steakhouse.

I found Fort Allen Road easily enough—a winding, narrow ribbon of asphalt that paralleled the river for a few miles, then crossed a narrow, shaky-looking bridge, looped south for a few miles more, then forked.

I flipped a mental coin and went left about two hundred yards, where the road turned suddenly unpaved, rutted, and semi-overgrown, and after a few bumpy miles it finally ended at the edge of a gloomy-looking swamp.

Where a handmade sign informed the interested, POLECAT SPRINGS—ONE MILE—HOLD YOUR NOSE.

And though I wasn't terribly interested, I put on a poncho, got out, found a semi-dry trail, and hiked into the swamp, which was thickly treed and unusually uneven with boggy mounds. It seemed to go on forever.

After about a twenty-minute walk, I came to a small flowing stream I knew was Nasty Creek. It flowed from a steamy, bubbling pond that I knew also was Polecat Springs.

I knew because the sulfuric emanation produced the deadliest smell I've ever encountered, and nose-holding was, indeed, well recommended.

Following the creek south a few hundred yards more, I came to the point where it flowed into the Tar, where I stopped and

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scanned the area with my binoculars.

I could see nothing of any cabin, though this was where my map showed it to be. After a few minutes, I gave it up and turned back to go upstream—and found it.

The cabin was about a hundred feet from where I stood, buried in a cluster of mangrove and resting on a gnarl of roots. I got my feet wet just hiking in.

It was a small thing, more of a hut than a cabin, with walls of weather-grayed planks, a slanted sheet metal roof, and a rusted pipe for a chimney. A boarded-up window in front had the remains of a bird's nest in it, and the door seemed to hang in its frame a bit crookedly.

As I got close, that unmistakable sense of "nobody's home" came through loud and clear, but when I got to the door, I gave it a good hard knock anyway, which scared a squirrel that'd been on the roof into leaping onto a tree branch right over my head, and also opened the door a little because it hadn't actually been closed. I gave it a slight push and took a step inside, smelling the odor of rotting wood that had me stepping very gingerly over the deep-sagging plank floor.

The cabin was one room, roughly twenty by twenty, and the pine wood ceiling had a sag in the middle, giving the place a very cramped look. There was a cot in one corner with a rolled sleeping bag under it, and an overturned kerosene heater in the other corner with a broken flue hanging from the ceiling above it. Against the right wall, just under a broken window, was a rusted sink with a hand pump that was leaning down toward the floor. There was a folding card table and a broken chair in the middle of the room, and the whole place was littered with clothes, cooking utensils, books, papers, other odds and ends, tree leaves, and animal droppings—and everything was drenched and rotting.

Crash Steensen wasn't home, and hadn't been for a long while.

Walking carefully over the squishy mess on the floor, I came to where the card table stood, on which was spread a few sodden pages of the sports section of the Raleigh *News and Observer* for October 12th of the previous year.

The Yankees had won the World Series.

Not the sports scoop of the century.

Looking around myself in the dim light, I saw a pile of rubbish under the cot, so I walked over, squatted down, and poked through it, finding only . . . rubbish. But then farther under the cot near the wall was a large gray bag, and I reached and brought it out. I had found Steensen's treasure.

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A Zippo lighter, a pouch of marijuana, some cigarette papers, a few ancient issues of Rolling Stone, and a stained Purple Heart medal, dangling from its case.

The citation, on onionskin paper, was folded inside, and although the light in the cabin was too poor to make out the whole of the faded text, the name "Steensen, Ralph J., 1st Lt." was clear enough.

So I was, at least, in the right place.

I put the ribbon and citation back in the bag with everything except the grass, which I prudently tossed onto the cot, then stood, looking around myself again.

"So, where'd you go, Crash?" I asked the dark room.

There was no reply, only the sound of the creaking floor and the rain thudding on the roof. The wild-goose-chase feeling was running strong in me.

It was plain that Steensen was long gone, but unless he'd done himself, he didn't seem to have planned on being as long gone as he was, and that, I realized, made my job something that wouldn't have a happy ending.

And as I started to leave, with a hard call to make to Scotty on my mind, I saw the map.

Tacked to the wall beside the door was a section of a standard road map, but with markings made on it, and a big X, beside which was the word "cave."

It was clearly a map of the area I was in, and the marks made on the map were a kind of trail that led south through the swamp, following the east bank of Nasty Creek, but I didn't know what to make of it.

I didn't know what to make of anything.

And the whole business was starting to depress me, so I put the map in the bag and hiked back to my truck. I drove back to Tarboro in a harder rain, deciding on the way that despite Scotty's warning, talking to the cops at this point was the best move to make.

Crowded by ancient trees, the Edgecomb County Sheriff's substation, just south of Tarboro, was one of those new/old buildings—a newer, concrete structure extended back from and around either side of an older Victorian building, complete with broad porch and columns.

I parked outside, climbed up onto the porch, and went inside, told my story to a uniformed clerk, and was eventually directed to the office of Deputy Sheriff Gerald Matini.

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A short balding man, with a weightlifter's physique that threatened, in places, to burst through the khaki uniform he wore.

He looked at Crash's picture after I'd introduced myself, then said, "I know him. Haven't seen him in six, seven months." He frowned at me. "He wanted?"

"Not that I know of," I replied.

Matini motioned me to a chair beside his desk and we both sat.

"Steensen's the friend of a friend," I explained, "and I'm just trying to locate him."

"Steensen?"

"Ralph Steensen, yes."

He frowned at the picture again. "Pretty sure he lived in an old cabin, down past Polecat Springs . . ."

"I've been there, and he's not."

"Hmph."

"And it doesn't look like he moved out."

I described the state of the cabin, and watched him do the math.

"That don't sound good," he said.

"I know."

"Lot of wild country down that way. The swamp and all."

He gave me a you-fill-in-the-blanks look, that I answered with a nod.

Matini handed me back Crash's photograph, then leaned back in his chair. "Not a bad guy, as I recall, but a little loosely wrapped."

"So I've been told."

He smiled. "Came in here one day, all in a lather about something I couldn't make heads or tails of."

"Oh?"

"Something about finding a body somewhere, but he couldn't tell me much that made any sense."

"When was this?"

"Like I said, 'bout six, seven months back," he shrugged. "But he just didn't make sense, you know? Sounded more like he had a real bad dream. Couldn't tell me where this cave was, except it was somewhere south of Polecat."

"A cave?"

He nodded. "I told him to draw me a map, and he got all excited, like I had accused him of lying, and stormed off."

I dug the map out of Steensen's bag and showed him.

"Well, this *is* a map," Matini said, after studying it. "Maybe he did find a body."

"Did you follow up on it?"

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He nodded patiently. "I gave Chief Gettis down in Bayette a call about it—that area south of Polecat is beyond the county line—but old Gettis couldn't figure where that cave could be, and there weren't nobody local reported missin', so . . ." He shrugged.

I nodded.

"I'll fax this on down to Chief Gettis; once we're past this hurricane, I'm sure he'll look into it."

I nodded again.

"About your friend . . ." he began.

"What kind of man is Gettis?"

"The best kind," he answered with no hesitation.

"I'm just wondering why Steensen didn't go to him."

Matini shrugged. "This station's closer to where Steensen lived," he pointed out.

"Okay."

Matini gave me a long look, then said, "You figurin' on goin' down to Bayette, nosin' around, you check in with Chief Gettis, you hear?"

"I will."

He gave me another long look, then got to his feet, his hand extended. "Nice talkin' with you, Mr. Virginiak."

Before leaving, I got a copy of the map made, then headed back to my motel, showered, and changed into my uniform because I only had one other dry set of civvies that I wanted to save. Then I had an artery-clogging session at a nearby restaurant, and returned to my room to watch the latest news on Amanda, which was then five hundred miles to the southwest and trying to make up its mind where to go next. I debated whether to call Scotty then and there and tell him the hunt for Steensen was done, or to go on to Bayette.

But it wasn't much of a debate.

And because it was just two P.M., and checkout was at three, I went ahead and checked out, then I gassed up the truck and put it on the road, heading south to Bayette.

Under even darker skies now, but with no rain for once, I drove again through Polecat Springs.

When I was about five miles north of Bayette, which according to my road map was a tiny speck nestled along the river, I saw flashing lights in my rearview.

I slowed and moved over, and when the police cruiser slowed itself and came up behind me, I knew I was the object of his attention, so I stopped.

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Wondering what the problem was.

I got out my license and registration and insurance, then waited because he took his time. Took a long time, in fact. Ten minutes ticked by, then fifteen, and my edginess turned into irritation. Finally, I saw the door to the cruiser pop open, and a tall, skinny cop, wearing an orange poncho, emerged.

I rolled down my window as he came up to it and looked in at me.

"In kind of a hurry, ain't ya?" he asked.

I hadn't been, but I didn't argue. I just handed up my paperwork, which he didn't take.

"Asked you a question," he said.

I looked at him.

He was thirty-fiveish, with a dark, pitted face and angry eyes.

"In-kind-of-a-hurry, ain't ya?" he asked again, slowly.

"Not particularly," I replied.

"Step out of the vehicle," he told me, standing back from the door.

Right, I thought.

"If I was speeding," I told him, "just give me the ticket, and . . ."

"I said, get out of that vehicle, boy!" he snapped, one hand going up under his poncho.

I smiled, nodded, and got out.

"Turn 'round," he said, "put your hands on the roof, step back, spread your legs."

I went along with it, not wanting to make more of the farce, and let him pat me down—looking for what, I don't know—but he found only my wallet.

"Turn around," he said.

I faced him again.

"Got yerself a real fancy rig there, don't ya?"

It was just a truck.

"Pick up a lot'a girls, do ya?"

I hadn't been fighting them off lately, but I said nothing.

He sneered and tossed my wallet at me, which I caught, then he came up close to me and said, "Soldiers comin' down here, drivin' like maniacs, got a lot'a nerve, thinkin' they can get away with anythin' just cause they got a uniform on."

I guessed it was Old Grand-Dad, but it might have been any bourbon.

"Know what I think?" he whispered.

Not a lot, I thought.

"I think you're all a bunch'a faggots."

I looked down at his name placard that showed just inside his poncho.

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"I think *you're* a faggot," he went on, trying hard to get a rise from me. "You got a problem with that?"

I said, "Which way is Bayette, Officer Mongon?"

He blinked, frowned, then made a sound of disgust and stepped back. "You ask me, you should just keep on goin'," he told me.

I pointed down the road. "About five miles south, right?"

"Bayette ain't for you, ya' hear?"

I smiled. "Thanks for your help," I said.

"You hear?!"

I waved, got back into the Explorer, and started it up.

Mongon got into his own vehicle, and fishtailed out from behind me, onto the highway—and was out of sight in seconds.

And I followed, but at a slower speed.

Bayette wasn't much of a town—it took only an ounce of gas to run the length of Main Street—but what there was of it seemed pretty enough. There was a hardware/feed store, a tiny grocery, a diner, a drugstore, a place called Dixie's Bar and Grille, and a touristy-looking little hotel, the Congaroo.

At either end of Main Street, on opposite sides, were The First Baptist Church of Bayette and The First *United* Baptist Church of Bayette. I imagined there was some interesting history there.

The police station was just off of Main Steet—a small, red-bricked building with a huge flag flapping hard in front. The Bayette elementary and middle school, done in the same red-brick, stood opposite, next to a library. A new-looking Bayette Clinic stood on the broad, heavily treed levee that edged the Tar River.

I parked in front of the police station, right behind officer Mongon's cruiser, and headed inside.

Where the air-conditioning hit me like a cold fist, and where in a large outer office cluttered with boxes, a huge, uniformed woman sat behind a counter, hand painting a ROAD CLOSED sign, one of about a dozen that were stacked by the counter.

She moved her eyes reluctantly toward me and said, "He'p you?"

"I'd like to see . . ."

"The hell you want?" Mongon shouted.

He'd just entered the outer office from somewhere in back.

To the woman, I said, "I'd like to see Chief Gettis . . ."

"I asked you a question," Mongon demanded, coming up to the counter.

"The man wants to see the chief, Carl."

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"Ain't talkin' to you, Belle!" he snapped.

"You don't take that tone to me, Carl Mongon . . ."

"You got a complaint to make," Mongon told me, "you make it to my face, ya' hear?"

I said, "My complaint, Officer Mongon, is *about* your face." I looked at the woman, who smirked. "*You* know what I mean, don't you, Belle?"

She snorted.

Mongon, a little purple in his cheeks, pointed a finger at me just as a door in back opened slightly and a voice boomed, "The *hell* is goin' on out there?"

Mongon's eyes flicked worriedly back to the door, then to me, as he started to say something, then changed his mind, making a sound of disgust and stalking out.

Belle gave me a wink, then got up and waddled to the opened door in back, poked her head inside, said something, then turned to me and waved me forward.

So I entered the office of Bayette Chief of Police Harold Gettis, who sat behind a broad oak desk, feet up on the corner, building a fish fly.

"Chief Gettis," I said, as I entered.

"Uh-huh."

"My name's Virginiak." I handed him my ID, which he took and squinted at briefly, then returned, and went back to the fly.

Gettis was sixtyish and grayhaired, with a lined, weathered face and bright blue eyes. He was a tall, heavy-shouldered man, with a big man's calmness about him.

"I'm sorry about Carl," he said wearily.

"You should be."

His eyes looked up at me now, as if I were a walking lawsuit. "He give you a ticket?"

"No, but he did stop me for no reason."

Gettis sighed, shook his head, put the fly down, put his feet on the floor, and waved me to a chair saying, "All I can do for you, Mr. Virginiak, is apologize."

I took the chair.

"He's had some . . . family problems," he explained.

Above him on the wall was a bronze plate with the words TO SERVE AND PROTECT etched into it, surrounded by about a dozen plaques, attesting to the law-enforcement virtues and community-spiritedness of Harold Gettis, and about half as many framed photographs of him handshaking different people, including a past president.

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"Think we can just forget it?" he asked.

"It's forgotten," I told him.

He nodded, then squinted at me. "So, what can I do for Army Counterintelligence?"

"Nothing," I assured him. "I'm here on personal business." I took out Steensen's picture and put it in front of him. "I'm looking for a man. Name's Steensen, Ralph Steensen, and I was told by . . ."

"Oh God," Gettis said, picking up the photograph and looking rattled. "I knew him."

"Knew?"

He blinked at the picture, then at me. "He a friend of yours?"

"A friend of a friend," I said.

He looked back at the picture and shook his head sadly. "Well, I'm sorry to say, he's dead."

"I see."

He frowned. "You say his name was Steensen?"

I nodded.

"Never did get his name," he told me. "Had no ID on him. I should've run his prints, but . . ." He put the picture down. "Well, I didn't."

"How did he die?"

Gettis rubbed a shaky hand over his brow. "He come around here a while back—must'a been last fall—started pestering some folks. I had to put him in the lock-up for a night." He shook his head slowly. "Hanged himself in his cell."

"Ah."

"Felt guilty as hell about it, I can tell ya."

Right, I thought.

"Still do," he added.

Steensen, Ralph, 1st Lt., USA. RIP.

"He have kin?" Gettis asked me.

"Just a friend," I told him. "Just friends."

"It was a helluva thing," he said quietly. "Finding him like that."

Right.

"I should've run his prints," Gettis went on. "I thought Belle did it, and she thought I did it, and then, well, the body was cremated, and come to find out, we never got him printed to start with, so he went out a John Doe." He sighed a tired-old-man sigh and added, "I'm gettin' too old for this job, I reckon."

Which, I decided, was not my problem.

I stood up, and so did Gettis, extending his hand to me, which I took and shook; then he walked with me out of his office to the station entrance, where we stopped.

The dark, late afternoon sky was in motion, and rain fell.

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I put on my hat and said, "Think that hurricane will hit?"

Gettis shrugged.

"They usually do," he replied, then put a hand on my shoulder. "I am truly sorry about your friend," he told me. "I truly am."

Walking to my truck, the world seemed suddenly more distant, but realer somehow. As if I were seeing, hearing, and smelling things more acutely but at a remove nevertheless.

It was, I think, the organism telling me to slow down and take stock, to know the world now because nothing lasts. I never knew Crash Steensen, but the loss of him hit me pretty hard.

The rain had picked up by the time I got back behind the wheel, and I didn't want to drive through it, didn't want to do much of anything, so I drove to the small hotel I'd seen and got a room with a balcony that overlooked the river.

I had a cold shower, then just sat and watched the rain for a while, thinking to call Scotty, but I didn't.

Bad news could always wait—both the giving and receiving—so I just sat there, on the balcony, until night came over everything.

The rain stopped around eight P.M., and I watched a little TV—Amanda was still hundreds of miles to the southwest and apparently not showing signs of moving toward land. I caught part of a baseball game, but couldn't stay interested, and finally decided to go out for a beer.

There was a small bar off the lobby of the hotel, but it was empty except for the bartender, and I felt the need to be among people, so I headed out of the hotel.

The Dixie Bar and Grille across the street was closed, the sign in the boarded window read CLOSED BY ORDER OF AMANDA, so I got in my truck and started to cruise, south and out of town.

And about five miles along, I found a place—The Last Chance.

It was a small, slate-roofed, pine-walled building, with a satellite dish on top and a business-could-be-a-lot-better air about it that I found appropriately depressing.

I parked next to an old rusted pickup in front, got out, and heard the mournful strains of a country-western song that leaked from the interior. Fighting back a what-are-you-*doing*-here? feeling that rose up suddenly, I went inside.

There were several tables to my left, at one of which a heavily made-up woman in a too-tight dress sat watching a large-screen TV on the wall in the corner. Several men stood around a pool

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table to the side of the TV. A wide bar ran along the right wall, behind which a scrawny old man stood, looking at me with what seemed suspicious surprise.

"What can I do you fer?" he asked as I took a seat on a stool.

I asked for a draft and got it, and I'd just taken a sip when the door to the "Gents" at the back of the place slammed open—and Carl Mongon swaggered out.

He went to the pool table, grabbed a cue, looked at the table for a second, then looked up and saw me.

"Well, if it ain't the Yankee faggot," he said.

Right, I thought.

"How ya'll doin' tonight, faggot?"

I looked at my face in the mirror behind the bar as Mongon made his way up to me, saying, "Well, well, well."

I had another sip of my beer.

"Ya know," Mongon said, tapping my shoulder with the cue, "correct me if I'm wrong, but I told you to pass on through Bayette."

I watched him in the mirror and saw the woman at the table, looking at us with anticipation.

"You remember me tellin' you that?"

"Carl!" one of the other pool players called out warningly.

"I'm talkin' to you, faggot!" Mongon said to me, now angry.

There was, as before, liquor on his breath.

I stood up and put money on the counter.

"You hear me?!"

I smiled at him.

"Boy, you'd better answer me or . . ."

I turned away and started out, but Mongon grabbed my shoulder —and then I lost it.

I turned fast and backhanded him hard across the face, sending him against the bar and knocking over a barstool.

He blinked at me, felt blood coming from his nose, touched it with his fingers, looked at it, then at me, and said, "Oh boy. You really done it now."

I waited.

He straightened up, held the cue out to his side, and said, "That was assault, faggot."

"No," I told him. "*This* is assault."

I kicked hard into his groin—harder than I should, but I was pretty worked up—then took the cue from him and whacked him with it on the shoulders and back, until he fell on his face, where he groaned there at my feet, holding himself.

His pool-playing friends came toward me, and I readied myself,

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but there was, curiously, no threat in them.

We did a stare-off thing for a few seconds, then two of them got Mongon to his feet and over to a table, where he sat and groaned, still holding himself. The third—young and wary—just kept staring, as did the wide-eyed woman in the too-tight dress.

And I felt suddenly disgusted. I tossed the pool cue onto the floor, then walked out.

I'd just gotten the door to the Explorer open when the third man—the young one—came out of the bar and said, "Excuse me?"

I looked at him. He seemed to be about twenty and he was bigger than I was, but no threat.

"I'm sorry about that stuff," he told me, nodding back over his shoulder.

I wasn't sure what he was apologizing for.

"Carl's my cousin," he told me. "He's not like this—usually."

"That's good to know."

"Picked a fight with me, little while ago," he added, as if to unmake his point.

"A lot of anger in him," I agreed.

He nodded, then shrugged and started back inside, but then stopped and said, "His wife run off 'bout a month ago."

"Uh-huh."

"Went off with some soldier, and Carl's been in a bottle since it happened."

"Well," I said to the young man, "Carl's going to be sore about a day." I got into my truck. "Ice is the best thing for it."

And figuring I'd had my fill of Bayette night life, I went back to the Congaroo and took another cold shower. Then I had a pipe back out on the balcony and watched the moon peek through some dark clouds, until I was sleepy enough to sleep.

And I did a good job of it, not getting up until after ten the next morning.

I grabbed a big breakfast in the café downstairs and decided to drive straight back to Raleigh and give Scotty the news about Crash in person.

So, I started packing up the few things I had, listening to the TV news on Amanda, now a hundred miles off the coast, but bearing northeast—it looked like good weather for the drive. I was just stuffing Steensen's sack of "valuables" into my suitcase when I finally noticed the stenciling on that old bag.

Faded to a bare whisper and stained-over, just below the cracked handle, were the words FEDERAL RESERVE BANK—ATLANTA, GA.

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I wondered about it as I packed it away. Wondered how Steensen came by such a thing. Wondered enough to unpack it and give it another look-over. Heavy gray canvas, black handle, zippered top, and those words.

Might have found it anywhere, I reasoned, but my head put it together with the map, the "cave," and the body he'd said he'd found, and I couldn't let it go.

Which has always been my curse—or virtue, as the case may be.

So I didn't check out, after all, I went out, instead, into semi-sunshine and put myself in the Bayette Public Library, behind a computer, putting in hit after hit on "Federal Reserve Bank, Atlanta."

After about an hour, I came up with a headline and story in the Atlanta *Constitution*, dated fifteen years earlier, which read:

ARMORED CAR GUARDS MURDERED
IN MULTIMILLION DOLLAR
FEDERAL RESERVE HEIST

Atlanta Police, the Georgia State Highway Patrol, and the FBI are undertaking a massive manhunt for two men wanted in connection with a Christmas Eve hijacking of an armored car, the killing of three Wells Fargo employees, and the theft of cash and bearer bonds from the Federal Reserve Bank in Atlanta.

According to a spokesman from the Atlanta Police Department, at 7:30 A.M. yesterday, two men armed with automatic weapons stopped a Wells Fargo van on Route 7, blocking the road with their vehicle. A gunfight ensued and two guards were killed. A third guard was taken to Northside Hospital in Atlanta where he later died. The names of the dead are being withheld pending notification of relatives.

The police believe the armed hijackers drove the armored truck to a wooded area north of Hartwell and removed five cash bags containing large denomination bills and negotiable bearer bonds valued at an estimated $24 million.

Police were first alerted to the hijacking of the truck and the murders when a passerby saw the third guard crawling along the highway and took the man to the hospital, where after giving a statement to police, he died of multiple gunshot wounds to the chest and stomach.

Which in itself made no connection, but another hit—this one from the pages of the Raleigh *News and Observer*, dated the next day—did.

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ARMED ROBBERY/MURDER SUSPECT KILLED IN SHOOTOUT WITH HIGHWAY PATROL OFFICER

One of two men being sought in Georgia for last night's multimillion dollar robbery of the Federal Reserve Bank in Atlanta and the murder of three armored car guards, was shot to death last night by a North Carolina highway patrolman.

According to a Highway Patrol spokesperson, Officer Harold Gettis of Fayetteville, a twenty-year veteran of the Patrol, had stopped a car being driven by the suspect along Route 123 east of Lake Keowee for speeding.

When Gettis, who was alone in his own vehicle, approached the suspect's car, the suspect drew a weapon and exchanged several shots with the officer.

The suspect, whose identity is yet to be determined, was killed during the exchange of gunfire. Officer Gettis was slightly wounded also.

Three Federal Reserve bags containing a large amount of cash were found in the trunk of the suspect's car.

The second man wanted in connection with the robbery and homicide remains at large, and the remaining cash bags are still missing.

Reading this second article gave me a shudder of excitement, as if I were on the verge of knowing something important.

But sitting there thinking about it, all I knew that I knew was that Crash Steensen had been using an old cash bag, which may or may not have been the fourth bag taken in an armed robbery fifteen years ago, that he'd hung himself in Harold Gettis's jail, and that this was all ancient history.

So I didn't get too excited.

I just walked back to the Congaroo, trying to make up my mind what, if anything, to do next, and decided to see Gettis.

I grabbed the old money bag from my room and drove to the police station.

Where I caught the man, just as he was on his way out.

"Figured to see you today," he told me with resignation, as we again took seats in his office. "I heard about what happened at The Last Chance last night."

"I'm sorry about that," I said.

"I'm sorrier than you, Mr. Virginiak. Carl Mongon is havin' a hard time right now, and everybody's his target, one way or another."

"It's all right," I assured him, then I handed him Steensen's bag.

"What's this?" he asked, looking it over.

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"See what's stenciled on the side?" I said.

He squinted, held it away, then put his glasses on, read it, and said, "I'll be damned."

"This bag was probably one of those taken in an armored car robbery fifteen years ago," I explained. "I read about it at the library."

"And just where did you get it?"

"Steensen's cabin," I told him. "He was using it to store his stash."

"Hmmph," he said, turning the bag around.

"I also read that you killed one of the men involved in that robbery."

"I surely did," he agreed. "That was back when I was Highway Patrol. My last week, in fact, before I took the job here. Pulled him over 'cause he was doin' double the speed limit up on Route 123." Gettis shook his head in mild amazement. "Damn fool just started pluggin' away at me."

"The second man was never found."

"That's right," he said, then frowned it over. "You thinkin' that the body your friend said he found was that second man?"

"It's possible. Steensen got this bag somewhere, and he said he'd found a body."

"Huh."

"And I found a map he'd drawn."

"Gerry Matini faxed me this," he said, showing me his copy of the map and pointing to it. "That's all swampland," he told me. "Never heard of no cave up in there."

"Might be worth a look," I offered.

"You're probably right," he agreed, "but I kind'a got my hands full at the moment. That hurricane ain't actin' right, and I gotta be close by in case it shifts on us."

I nodded. "Well, I've got nothing on my hands at the moment, Chief Gettis," I shrugged. "I think I'll give it a look myself. At least, see if I can find the cave."

"Fair enough," he said easily. "Mind you're not in the swamp when that damned hurricane hits."

So that's what I did. Instead of leaving Bayette, I headed back into the swamp.

Not for any reason easy to explain, but something along the line of connecting the final dots of Steensen's life. Making some sense of it. Something like that.

In any case, I went.

But, rather than take the route Steensen had outlined on his map, a trail he'd marked to show the way he'd taken from his

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cabin, through the swamp, and along the creek to the cave, I got in the truck and drove east, out of Bayette, toward the ocean on Highway 10, paralleling his route just to the north.

The sky was darkening, but the radio still reported Amanda bearing to the northeast, and there was no rain, so I didn't anticipate a weather problem—and all I really wanted to do just then was verify the fact that the cave was there.

I mean, what could go wrong?

But about a mile from the shore, the road ended, curving south and becoming little more than a muddy path, which dissolved itself into an endless swamp, where I stopped.

According to Steensen's map, the creek ran southeast at this point, but there was a hilly section of land that blocked my view, so I got out and, seeing a fairly dry trail that snaked out through the swamp, decided to walk it. I grabbed a flashlight because it was getting darker by the minute, and started in.

And I didn't like the look of the sky, which resembled a black mass of swirling fudge, tinged with red. To the southeast, where Amanda was throwing a fit, the sky was just dead black—but it wasn't raining yet, so I kept on.

I got to the base of a rocky, black-mudded, gnarl-treed hill, and skirted around it to the south, where I could see the swollen creek through the mangrove. More like a river, at the moment, running hard and high. I made my way down closer to it and stood there on the bank, took out the map again, studied it, turned it, turned myself, looked up, swung the flashlight around—and saw the cave.

About halfway up the mud hill was a dark hole, the opening as big as a refrigerator door on its side.

And then it started to rain. Hard.

So hard that in just seconds I was soaked through.

And I was just thinking to get myself the hell out of there because Amanda wasn't bearing northeast at all, but damn well right down on me, when I heard the first bang of the rifle.

It came from somewhere in the swamp behind me. I froze, wondering who would be hunting what in the middle of a hurricane. I then heard a second shot that spanged off a rock by my feet, and I knew.

I moved as fast as I could, up over the rocks and into the ankle-deep ooze of the side of the hill. I got ten feet from the cave opening when I felt a hammer hit my left shoulder, and I was down, face first in the mud.

Feeling dazed, but sufficiently afraid, I didn't kid around. I got

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my feet under me again and scrambled the rest of the way to the cave and inside—just as two more shots hit the ground behind me.

Lying in mud, just inside the cave opening, I was safe, for the moment, or so I told myself. My arm was numb with pain and I needed a breather, but reason came shouting down at me that I was just lying in a hole waiting for some killer to show up and finish the job.

So I moved farther into the pitch-dark cave.

Which got a bit bigger—enough so I could stand, but when I did, my head hit a tangle of roots. I crouched again and moved on, thinking there might be a back door, but with little hope of that.

Little hope of anything, in fact, but what could I do?

More shots rang out that came from the cave opening, and I went flat again, on my back, pressing myself into the mud. Whoever it was, was firing blind, but he could get lucky, so I made myself a part of the cave floor and wall.

Heard the wind and rain start sounding like a runaway train.

Heard a couple more shots, which hit I don't know where.

Pressed myself deeper into soft, wet earth.

Heard another shot that brought some mud down into my face.

And then he got lucky.

Not that lucky. It was only a nick in my scalp above my right ear, but my lights went out, and I was down for the count.

About twelve hours' worth because it was after four A.M. the next morning when I did the God-my-head-hurts and where-am-I thing.

It was completely dark, and I was lying in six inches of water under a waterfall. As I felt around for my flashlight, I had the sense that the cave had gotten smaller while I was away—and when I found the flash and flicked the light on, I could see why.

The pounding rain above was melting the walls of my little hole, and they'd soon simply flow together. I decided I didn't want to be around for that; I'd take my chances with my would-be killer outside.

But then I saw a bone-hand reaching out from the wall.

A hand connected to a wrist, to the rest of a skeleton. It was half in, half out of the wall, and draping the remains were two black, rotting—empty—cash bags.

It was the body Steensen had found.

It was the remains of the second man in the armed robbery of the Atlanta Federal Reserve.

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The one who "got away."

And there was a hole the size of a half dollar in the middle of his forehead, and there was something attached to his wrist that wasn't a watch.

But before I could give this any thought, the body in the wall began to sag outward as the whole cave started to sink around me.

So I got out of there despite the hurricane, and got back to my truck and made my calls—and then I waited.

And it took time because Amanda had hit hard and everyone was busy at other things.

But it all worked out.

I was standing outside my truck, still nose down in a ditch, around five P.M., when Gettis pulled up beside me and got out.

And because of the blood on my face and shirt, and my muddy-wet look, he stared and said, "The hell happened to you?"

"Long story."

He looked over the condition of my truck, then waved me to his Jeep. "Can worry about your ride later. We better get you to a hospital."

So I got in, and he started us toward town, saying, "You been lookin' for that cave?"

"Got shot at," I told him.

He looked amazed. "Somebody shot you?"

"That's right."

He thought that over, then said, "You think Mongon?"

"No," I said. "Not Mongon."

He gave me a questioning look.

"I found the body, Chief. I found the body of the second man in that armored car robbery."

Gettis stared at me.

"I found the other two empty cash bags."

He looked back at the road.

I said, "I found that body, Chief, and he was wearing handcuffs."

"Handcuffs?"

I waited until he glanced at me again, then said, "You know a good lawyer?"

"What do you mean?"

I only looked back at him.

He shook his head and laughed. "I don't know what the hell you're talkin' about . . ."

"Must have been a hell of a night," I said.

He frowned.

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"Routine stop of a speeder," I explained, "turns into a shoot-out—turns into a life-changing event."

He tried looking mystified, but he couldn't keep it up.

I shook my head at the futility of his denials. "You know what forensics can do these days, Chief. That body had a hole in its skull in front, and no exit wound, so the bullet is still in there—and they'll know it came from your gun—the one you used on his partner."

Gettis took a bit of lower lip between his teeth.

"They might even be able to trace the handcuffs and—there's the money. I mean, you *had* to have done something with that money, and they'll track it down . . ."

"You're crazy!"

"I'm not crazy, Chief, and you're done."

He thought about it, but there was too much certainty in me, so he pulled his gun from its holster with his left hand, and held it on his lap.

Right, I thought.

"Jesus Christ," Gettis laughed. "I forgot clean about those handcuffs." He shook his head. "God's truth, I havn't given them a damn thought in all these years." He gave me a can-you-believe-this look. "I am *some* criminal mastermind."

I said, "Are you pointing that gun at me, Chief?"

He snorted. "And you are *right*. It was one *hell* of a night."

Gettis turned us off Route 64, onto a small road that headed us toward the river.

"So what happened?" I said.

"What happened," he echoed vaguely.

I waited.

"What happened was," he went on, "they shot me, I shot back. Killed one, and nicked the other." He looked at me and snorted. "Handcuffed him."

"Uh-huh."

He sighed and put his eyes back on the road. "And then he started talkin' about money, and makin' me rich if I let him go." He shrugged. "Money was in the trunk," he said, with a disbelieving head shake. "I could not *believe* it."

"Where are we going, Chief?"

Gettis frowned hard. "I'd never done a dishonest thing in my whole life until that night—but—lookin' at all that money, the idea just—come into me—you know?"

"You killed him."

He kept the frown in place for a moment, then said, "I killed him. Buried him out on the bog." He laughed shortly. "Where he'd

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never be found." He shook his head. "I belong in the Bad Guy Special Olympics, I surely do."

"Where are we going, Chief?" I asked again.

He looked at me with some regret. "Cross the river," he told me sadly. "You can get it now or later. It's up to you."

I decided later.

I said, "And Steensen?"

Gettis sighed. "Right," he said. "Steensen."

"You killed him too."

He didn't deny it.

"Thing is," he told me, "you get old, and you get more scared of things. The way he was talkin', I knew he'd found that body, and he wasn't gonna let it go, and sooner or later he'd talk to somebody who'd listen. I couldn't handle the idea of prison." He looked at me again. "*Still* can't," he added with meaning.

"So you tried to kill me," I said.

"What *else* could I do?"

"And now you're going to finish the job?"

"Can't let you talk either."

Right, I thought, and that was that.

"Well," I told him, "I already have."

He frowned at me, and I showed him the small black microphone I was wearing just under my collar, and said, "What do you think I've been *doing* all day, Chief?"

At which point, and dead on cue, a siren began behind us.

We were just then approaching an ancient-looking bridge. Gettis floored the accelerator, fishtailing the vehicle so that it slammed the rail of the bridge as we started over it.

We were about halfway across the bridge when two state patrol cruisers appeared ahead, blocking the way.

"It's over," I told him. "It's over!"

But he didn't hear me, and he was past caring.

Past thinking, too, because there was no way out, but he stomped on the brake, put the Jeep in reverse, and swung us around, slamming the back end into the wooden rail. Then he went forward, trying to turn the vehicle around, smashing the front into the opposite rail. Then he turned back again, trying to gain an angle, but this time went too far.

The back of the Jeep went through the rail, and we tilted, front end up.

We held there for a second or two—a very long second or two—then we flipped. Over and down, and hit the river hard.

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And I was out for a while. The roof of the Jeep collapsed with the impact, and my head had gotten a bang, but I became aware again just as the water rose to cover my face. I got a good deep breath as the river current dragged us down and under and into a black, unforgiving world.

I got my seat belt off and pulled on the door handle, but it was jammed tight, and though I hit it with everything I had, it didn't budge, so I raised my feet—or lowered them in my upside down world—and kicked out at the windshield twice before I felt it give. I managed to slip out of the vehicle just as it hit the soft river bottom.

I turned myself right side up under the hood of the Jeep, my knees sinking into the muck. Hanging onto the steering wheel with one hand because the current was pulling at me hard, I reached back inside for Gettis.

Who was still upside down in his seat, and he was conscious and looking at me.

I couldn't read his eyes, but if I could, I would have seen that the heart had gone out of him.

His seat belt hadn't been on, but when I grabbed for the front of his shirt, he pushed my hand away, and when I reached for him again, he reached up himself and pulled my hand from the steering wheel, and shoved me back.

He wasn't going anywhere.

I tried to grab for the dashboard, but the current had me, and then I saw him smile—a kind of thanks-for-nothing smile—and finally, I was swept away. And he was gone in the dark.

I broke the surface of the river near to the east bank, about a hundred yards from the bridge, and hauled myself onto the muddy shore, then just sat there, watching the river.

Matini's men spotted me, but I was too tired to budge, so I stayed put, sitting in the mud.

Eventually, they came down to me, and Matini himself after a while, and there was a lot of talk about what to do, but it was all their business, so I kept quiet.

An ambulance came for me, despite my protest, but once the EMT took a look at the top of my head, and the ugly welt I had along the side of my skull, he convinced me it might be serious.

A head can take only so many bangs.

I spent the night in the hospital, but the X-rays were clear, so I left the following morning, and did a long Q and A with the county D.A. that afternoon. By six o'clock I was back at the Congaroo.

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I hung around a few days, there being no rush to be anywhere, and asked some questions—about Gettis, whom no one believed could have ever done anything wrong regardless of the news that was flooding the local media, and about the missing money.

About which I ended up talking with a very, *very* old man, a lawyer who lived in nearby Waverly.

He was an ex-judge, in fact, who'd been Gettis's friend, and who, after we'd chatted most of an afternoon, in a getting-a-feel-for-each-other way, told me some things "in a hypothetical sense" that put everything together.

So it was almost a week since I'd last seen Scotty, before I went to visit again.

On one of his "good days," he told me. A day when he could get out of bed and maneuver around on his wheels.

And now, sharing a six pack I brought, on the shaded porch that overlooked the ball field at Cormier Memorial, watching a September shower muddy up the world, I told him the whole story, and gave him the Purple Heart I'd taken from Steensen's cabin.

Which he held and looked at for a long, quiet time, then finally said, "Crash got this saving my ass."

"Oh?"

He nodded. "In Nam, a zillion years ago."

I watched him remember.

"I'd only been in-country about a week," he told me, "and my chopper went down up near Phu Bai. Dislocated my shoulder." He shook his head. "The area was red with Cong, but old Crash come lookin' for me anyway, and got me out." He frowned sharply. "We was about a mile from the LZ, and we started taking ground fire, and a round hit Crash—" He pointed to his left temple. "—right there. Took out a chunk of brain. Blood everywhere." He shook his head again. "Don't know *how* he got us down to the LZ in one piece."

"A good man," I said.

Scotty nodded, sipped beer, and sighed. "Didn't stay in touch with him much over the years," he told me quietly. "Like I should have."

"It's like we're all related," I said. "Crash saved your ass, you saved mine."

Scotty shrugged, then frowned at me. "So what did he do with the money?" he asked. "Gettis, I mean."

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I finished off the can of beer I held, and opened another saying, "Fourteen million, five hundred and fifty thousand in bearer bonds."

"Whoa!"

I laughed, sipped some of my own beer, and said, "Turns out, he gave it away."

Scotty stared. "You're shittin' me."

I shook my head, then settled back in the big wicker chair I was in and explained. "Back fifteen years, three hurricanes, one after the other, hit the area down around Bayette hard. Dumped a lot of rain—too much—and Bayette was flooded out. Nothing was left."

Scotty gave me a get-on-with-it hand wave.

"Bayette's a real small town," I went on, "right on the Neuse, and it had been flooded out before, and the man I talked to told me the people there just lost their will to start over. There wasn't enough money coming in to rebuild anyway, so the town was going to disappear." I smiled. "Harold Gettis had just been made chief of police of a town that wasn't there anymore."

I had some more of my beer. "But then Gettis stops a speeder, finds the money, and gets his big idea."

"I'll bet the sonofabitch did," Scotty sneered.

I held a hand up. "Through a lawyer," I told him, "who knows a lot more than he'll admit to, Gettis made anonymous donations to people and to the town itself. Got homes rebuilt. Got a new levee constructed. Got better drainage. Kept Bayette on the map."

"He gave it all *away*?" Scotty complained.

"No indication he ever spent a dime of that money on himself."

He frowned all this over hard, then put his eyes back out into the rain-swept ball field, and for a while neither of us said anything, just watched the dark world outside, the rain sheeting across the field, the wind whipping some of the wet in on us. Then Scotty finished the can he was holding, popped another open, and said, "But—the sonofabitch killed Crash."

I nodded, and agreed. "The sonofabitch killed Crash."

And we mourned the loss of our brother.

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REEL CRIME

STEVE HOCKENSMITH

It's hard to imagine a "film noir" Christmas movie. The dark, downbeat genre isn't exactly warm and cuddly, and noir classics like *Double Indemnity, Kiss Me Deadly,* and *The Grifters* just wouldn't work if they ended with a group hug and a teary rendition of "Auld Lang Syne."

So credit *The Ice Harvest* (opening nationwide November 23) for boldly going where Frank Capra has never gone before. It's a Christmas comedy . . . and a brooding, brutal crime thriller.

Based on a novel by Scott Phillips, the film chronicles a not-so-merry Christmas Eve for shady Wichita attorney Charlie Arglist (John Cusack), who's bilked one of his sleazy clients (Randy Quaid) out of millions of dollars. Unfortunately for Charlie, Wichita gets a wet Christmas instead of a white one, and the freezing rain and sleet foul up his plans for a quick getaway. The longer he's stuck in town, the more his schemes come apart at the seams, and soon he and his fast-talking drinking-buddy-in-crime (Billy Bob Thornton) are running for their lives—on thin ice.



The Ice Harvest. *Photo by Chuck Hodes*

Obviously, *It's a Wonderful Life* it ain't, unless George Bailey really did steal all that money from the savings and loan, and mean old Mr. Potter brought in a hitman to whack him. The resulting film is so dark, even the man who dreamed up the twisted, twisty plot is a bit shocked.

"I was surprised at how closely they hewed to the structure of it and how much of the details remained intact," says Phillips. "Particularly my filthy dialogue."

A screenwriter himself, Phillips had hoped he'd get to write the

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Scott Phillips

script if his novel ever became a film. But when he found out who was anxious to adapt the book—filthy language and all—he was happy to step aside. After all, not every writer's lucky enough to have a Pulitzer Prize–winning novelist (*Empire Falls* author Richard Russo) and an Academy Award–winning writer/director (*Places in the Heart* auteur Robert Benton) interested in turning his book into a screenplay.

"Besides my high esteem for their work, I knew that their reputations would attract talent that mine couldn't," Phillips says. "And lo and behold we ended up with John Cusack, Harold Ramis, and Billy Bob Thornton."

Hold on. Harold Ramis? Bill Murray's slacker/soldier pal in *Stripes*? The tallest, skinniest Ghostbuster? The man who stepped behind the cameras to bring the world *Caddyshack* and *National Lampoon's Vacation*?

Yes, that Harold Ramis. Though he's had a long career as a comic character actor and director of lightweight farces, Ramis was eager to try his hand at noir when Benton decided not to direct *The Ice Harvest* himself. It's not the first time Ramis has mixed comedy with crime: He directed and helped write the *Sopranos* Lite flicks *Analyze This* and *Analyze That*. And according to Phillips, Ramis's films weren't always as frothy and cheerful as they might at first appear.

"People thought it was weird that Harold would be considered to direct it because he's done comedies forever," says Phillips. "But to me there's always been a real dark thread running through all his movies, and he certainly walked that fine line here between bleak despair and belly laughs."

In fact, Ramis didn't just walk that line, he crossed it: His first cut of the film featured an ending so harsh (and faithful to Phillips's book) he eventually had to scrap it.

"They did change my ending, because mine was so shocking the test audiences were trying to burn down the screen afterwards," Phillips jokes. "Harold was nervous about showing me the new one. Which I understand, because it could certainly sink the whole thing if the tone was wrong. But I saw it in New York during post-production and thought it was perfect—very much in the spirit of the book."

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So while Ramis's adaptation of *The Ice Harvest* won't feature the novel's vicious suckerpunch of an ending, at least no one ends up learning "the true meaning of Christmas" or thanking Santa Claus for saving the day. And as far as Phillips is concerned, that's a happy ending in and of itself.

"I'm one of the few authors you'll ever talk to who's completely satisfied with an adaptation," he says.

Kathy Reichs is another one of the few, the proud, the pleased with an adaptation. So far, at least.



Kathy Reichs. Photo by Catherine Sebastian

Not that *Bones*, the Fox series based on Reichs's bestselling mysteries about forensic anthropologist Temperance Brennan, is completely faithful to her books. It's not.

"It differs quite a bit," Reichs says. "It's not the same Tempe. She works in Washington, D.C. [instead of North Carolina and Quebec, like in the novels]. She works with an FBI agent [instead of a hunky detective]. But I think my readers will like it because it's more Tempe, even if it's a different manifestation of her."

The small-screen "manifestation" is also substantially more youthful than her paper-bound counterpart: *Bones's* heroine is played by twenty-seven-year-old Emily Deschanel, who's at least a decade younger than the character Reichs writes about. But the author says she didn't mind seeing her creation take a sip from the Fountain of Youth—as long as that sip didn't turn into a gulping chug.

"One of the issues that I made very clear from the outset was the age of the character. I didn't want her turned into a twenty-year-old psychic," says Reichs. "And [the producers] understood that. But it was a compromise. The Tempe on television is a little bit younger than the Tempe in my books." Even over the phone, you can almost hear Reichs shrug. "That's Hollywood."

In addition to shaving a few years off her age, the television Tempe got to add a new career to her résumé. Though by day she uses her science savvy to fight crime as part of a team of experts at the fictional "Jeffersonian Institution," by night she writes a

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bestselling series of mysteries about a forensic anthropologist named . . . Kathy Reichs.

"I think my readers are really going to get a kick out of that," says Reichs, who's a busy forensic anthropologist in real life, splitting her time (like the Tempe of her novels) between North Carolina's Office of the Chief Medical Examiner and Quebec's Laboratoire des Sciences Judiciaires et de Médecine Légale.

Reichs's devotion to forensics comes through in her books, which don't skimp on scientific (or gory) detail. And that's part of the reason she's so pleased with *Bones*. As a producer on the series, she can make sure it gets right what some forensics-heavy TV dramas get wrong.

"I was out there for the shooting of the pilot and I worked with the actors, particularly Emily, showing how you reconstruct a skull and that sort of thing," Reichs says. "I worked with the props people to make sure that Tempe's kit for crime scenes is correct and that the body parts look real. And I'm on e-mail or the phone every day with the researcher or one of the writers working with them to get the science right and the storylines realistic."

Of course, as realistic as the storylines might be, *Bones* is no documentary. For one thing, most FBI agents aren't nearly as photogenic as co-star David Boreanaz (who set pulses to pounding as a devilishly handsome bloodsucker on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*). Reichs concedes that her everyday work isn't quite as hi-tech and glamorous as what the series portrays.



Bones © *FOX*

"In the show, Tempe's lab is this . . ." Reichs pauses, lost for words, then bursts out laughing. "[Executive producer] Barry Josephson thinks big! Tempe has this incredible lab. But we're trying to keep it realistic even if we do have fun with it. One big advantage we have is that I'm a practicing forensic scientist. We won't have to go begging for help. If we have a question, I can just call up a colleague or walk across the corridor at the lab and say, 'Hey, have you got a minute . . . ?' "

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Snow Angels

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

So Gramps took them down to the road anyway. Bobberts stuck his hands in his pockets. His fingers found his dad's Swiss Army knife. He didn't even get to use it. Dad was kinda mean about that.

You don't use knives to cut trees, Bobs, Dad said. *That's what the chainsaw was for.*

But Bobberts brought the knife so they wouldn't need the chainsaw. Last year, Daddy said the chainsaw was why Gramps took Bobberts and Sarah to the car before the Christmas tree was cut.

Too much could go wrong with chainsaws.

So him and Sarah got sent to the car again. This time, Bobberts was mad.

Sarah didn't care. She just skipped ahead, happy to be in the trees and the snow. She liked outside, she liked playing, she liked it all.

She didn't know there was cool stuff they couldn't do.

Dad said Bobberts would get to do it "some day."

Bobberts was beginning to think "some day" meant "never."

The snow on the path was muddy. You could see the rocks underneath it. Bobberts kicked one, and Gramps laughed.

"It's not that much fun, kiddo," Gramps said. "They get a chainsaw and just slice through the tree. It's over in five seconds."

Bobberts nodded. Dad said the same thing, but that didn't mean it was true. Bobberts had never seen somebody use a chainsaw—Dad said he was too little. He was nine now, and tall for his age. Everybody said so.

He wasn't little anymore.

Sarah skipped through the trees. "There's the car," she said, pointing.

Their car and two others. Those weirdo people who were walking with Daddy and the tree guy into the woods. Bobberts didn't want to call it a farm, because he didn't see pigs and cows and horses. It was just a woods with lots of Christmas trees.

Gramps reached the car first and unlocked it. Then he rubbed

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his hands together. "You kids get inside," he said. "I gotta see a man about a dog."

As he walked back up the path, Sarah looked at Bobberts. "There's dogs?" she asked.

Bobberts shook his head. "Gramps says that when he's gotta go number one."

Sarah giggled and put her hands over her mouth. She was still little. Four. Mom said everybody had to watch out for her. Small and pretty and all girl, that's what Mom said. But Mom never saw the goofy side of Sarah, except that one time. That time she was really, really little and trying to learn Bobberts's name. She couldn't say Bobby, so Daddy tried to teach her Robert.

It came out Bobberts, and it stuck.

Sometimes Bobberts liked it. Sometimes he wished she wasn't so cute so everybody remembered everything she said.

She took his hand and tugged. "Lookee the snow."

She pointed at the field above the cars. The trees didn't start right away. There was one big pile of white.

He knew what she was thinking. Sarah'd been like this ever since the snow started. One big pile of white and she wanted to dive into it.

Finally Daddy taught her snow angels just so she wouldn't go running into the big pile of white and dive into a rock or something.

"Don't wanna," Bobberts said. He'd get colder than he already was. Besides, big kids didn't make snow angels.

"C'mon." Sarah tugged him toward the empty whiteness. Bobberts looked around for Gramps, but didn't see him. The trees were pretty thin right near the road.

Gramps taught Bobberts how to pee in the woods last year.

First rule, Gramps said, *go deep enough that nobody can see you.*

A car went by on the road, kicking up slush. Bobberts winced. He was gonna get wet and cold no matter where he was.

"You do it," he said.

Sarah stuck her tongue out at him, and ran up the hill. She stopped smack in the middle, turned to face the road, spread her arms, and fell backwards.

Snow puffed up around her.

Bobberts kicked the snow off a nearby rock and perched on it. He could see Sarah and he could see the path. Far away, he heard the moan of a chainsaw, and closer, the slam of a car door.

Sarah made a perfect angel. Then she sat up and wiped the snow off her face. "C'*mon*," she said.

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Bobberts shook his head.

She put her thumb to her nose and waggled her fingers at him. Then she got up, moved a few steps down, and flopped again.

How many snow angels was she gonna make?

Mom would be so mad at him. Sarah wasn't wearing her mittens, and her coat was gonna get soaked.

Bobberts looked up the trail for Gramps, but still didn't see him. Then something caught his eye. A guy was standing in the thin trees, staring down at Sarah. The guy was wearing gray, just like the trees, and he blended into the hillside.

Bobberts felt a little shiver. How long had that guy been there?

Adults were so creepy.

Sarah sat up again, took off her hat, and shook snow from it. Then she stuck it on her blond curls. This time she didn't look at Bobberts at all.

This time, she went farther down the hill.

He saw the pattern she was making. Snow angels, like those cutouts you make with folded papers and scissors. She was really good at stuff like that. Mom said Sarah was gonna be an artist one day.

Bobberts sighed. This was taking forever. Daddy said only five minutes and it had to be lots more than that. The chainsaw still rumbled back there.

The tree wasn't even that great. There was a bigger, fuller one right next to it, but Daddy said it wouldn't fit in the front door. Gramps'd winked at Bobberts and said Daddy just didn't want to carry it all the way back to the car.

Bobberts rubbed his nose with the back of his hand. He was getting snow snot. Nose drips that happened out in the cold, that's what snow snot was. Gramps said so. Sarah said it was just icky, and Bobberts agreed.

Sarah.

He looked up. She was in the middle of her fourth angel. She'd done 'em so perfect that they looked like they were hanging along the slope. She'd fallen on her own footprints, so you couldn't see them at all.

Then that guy came out of the trees. He snuck out, like he didn't want nobody to see him. He walked right into the middle of the fourth angel, screwing it all up, and bent down.

Sarah screamed.

Bobberts stood up. No Gramps. Nobody, just that chainsaw still whirring far away.

The man grabbed Sarah by her arms and pulled her up. She was screaming and kicking and biting just like Mom taught them to do.

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The man didn't care. He just grabbed her like Daddy did sometimes and tucked her under his arm. She was yelling, "Bobberts! Bobberts!"

And Bobberts didn't know what to do.

The man was going back toward the trees.

Bobberts looked at the path, but it was empty. He bit his lower lip, and headed up the hillside.

When someone gets you, Mom always said, *you do what you gotta do to get away.*

She never said what you gotta to do when someone got Sarah.

Bobberts was breathing hard. He had to hurry. That guy had Sarah and she was screaming and he was scared. What if that guy was one of those guys who hurt little kids? What if they never see Sarah again?

Bobberts could hear himself breathe. It sounded louder than the screaming, louder than that weird saw noise. Louder than the guy yelling at Sarah to shut up.

But the guy had his back to Bobberts, and he was moving fast.

Through the trees, Bobberts could see the car. It was the same one that had passed earlier, the one that sent slush everywhere.

The guy'd seen Sarah and come back for her.

That made Bobberts even madder.

They were almost at the trees. Bobberts had to do something.

He ran the last few steps, slipping on the snow. And that's when he thought of it: He was wearing really good boots (Mom made him), but that guy was wearing Nikes.

Nikes weren't made for snow.

Bobberts reached the guy and grabbed the guy's back leg. The guy's front foot slipped. The guy turned and yanked at the same time, sliding on the snow. Bobberts let go.

The guy fell on his belly, and went down the hill like he was on a sled, dropping Sarah. She was crying really hard now. The fall had hurt her too.

Bobberts half ran, half slid down near them.

"Sarah!" Bobberts yelled. "Run away!"

Sarah was stretched out in the snow. She was still crying. Sometimes she could cry so hard she'd forget what she was doing.

Bobberts pointed to the path. "Get Gramps!"

She stumbled. The guy crawled toward her, getting close to Bobberts.

And that's when Bobberts kicked him.

The guy rolled onto his back. He was really big and really mean looking. Bobberts was never so scared in his whole life, not even when the sixth grade boys ganged up on him.

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"Boy or girl," the man said in an icky voice. "Don't matter to me."

He pulled Bobberts to him, but he didn't knock Bobberts down.

The guy grinned at him, and a shiver went through Bobberts. A shiver, and an ick, and a fear like he'd never had.

So he kicked again. Kicked and kicked in the place Gramps said no boy ever really liked, and the man was squealing and rolling away and holding himself. Sarah was gone—where'd she go?—and there wasn't sound, except Bobberts's breathing and the guy squealing and the bam of Bobberts's boot hitting the guy.

Then the guy's hand grabbed Bobberts's foot, and Bobberts went down, just like Sarah did when she was making snow angels. Only he was surprised and the air went right out of his body.

"Don't make no difference." The man's voice sounded airy now, and kinda weird. He sat up. His skin was sickly looking, like he was gonna puke.

The guy was bigger than the sixth grade boys. Bobberts couldn't stop them from beating him up. This guy would win. This guy would hurt him.

But Momma said when someone gets you, you do what you gotta do to get away.

Bobberts slipped his hand in his pocket. Daddy was already mad at him about the knife. He told Bobberts that Bobberts was too young to use it.

Do what you can, Momma whispered in his ear.

Bobberts dug the knife out, and snicked it open and jabbed it in the guy's arm. The guy screamed and reached for the knife, but Bobberts remembered to pull it out so that Daddy wouldn't get mad that it got stolen, and the guy was calling Bobberts bad names, and pulling even harder on Bobberts's boot. Bobberts stabbed the guy's arm again, and again, and then Bobberts missed, and the knife slipped and hit the guy in the leg.

The guy really screamed, and far away, Bobberts heard Gramps yelling his name, then yelling for Daddy, and then just yelling.

But the guy was screaming and rolling away from Bobberts and blood was squirting like the guy's leg was one giant water pistol, and the snow was getting all red.

The guy had let go of Bobberts's ankle, but it took him a minute to realize it because his ankle still hurt. His whole body hurt from falling and running out of air. The guy was still screaming, and Daddy was yelling now, and Bobberts got up and tripped his way over Sarah's snow angels to the path.

Gramps took his arm, and Daddy was running down from the woods, and Sarah was crying, and the tree guy was yelling into his phone about police and help, and the weirdo couple behind him

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wanted to use the chainsaw to scare the guy. Then Gramps said it wouldn't be necessary because he'd be dead soon anyway.

At first Bobberts thought Gramps meant the guy would be dead because Gramps would see to it, but Gramps didn't mean that at all. The guy had stopped screaming and the blood wasn't squirting any more, and the snow was so red it didn't look like snow, and the blood was dripping down the footprints into Sarah's snow angels, decorating them like Momma decorated her Christmas cookies, with a touch of red over the white.

Then Daddy reached them and grabbed Sarah and looked at Bobberts, and Gramps said, "The kid saved them both," and Daddy looked like he was gonna cry, and Bobberts knew exactly why.

He held out the knife. It was bent funny and covered with gunk. He said, "I'm sorry, Daddy. I think I broke it."

And Daddy took the knife from him, dropped it onto the path, and pulled Bobberts to his other side.

Bobberts clung onto Daddy's jeans, feeling Daddy's leg shake, or maybe Bobberts was shaking, and Sarah was crying, and Gramps was telling everybody to stay on the path, and Daddy said, "It's okay," but they all knew it really wasn't.

The tree guy couldn't wait and he had to go see if the mean guy was all right, and Gramps kept shaking his head. Bobberts wanted to get out of there, but he knew they couldn't go yet.

"Daddy," Bobberts said. "You forgot the tree."

And Daddy laughed, only it didn't sound like a Daddy-laugh. It sounded kinda shaky and weird, and he looked at Gramps and said, "I think we're gonna get a tree from the store." Bobberts didn't know what that meant, but he nodded anyway.

Sarah wiped her face off and lifted her head and said, "I was just making angels, Daddy."

"I know," Daddy said. "I know. And they protected you, honey."

"Uh-uh," Sarah said. "That was Bobberts."

And Bobberts smiled, even though he was shaking. He smiled and reached for his sister, and hugged her, even though it was a baby thing to do.

And nobody said nothing, nobody except Gramps, who said, "We got hot cocoa in the car," like it was a reward.

And maybe it was.

Like smiling against his dad's leg, and hugging his sister, and being really, really glad that nobody said nothing about the knife, lying bloody and broken in the snow.

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21 STEPS

O'NEIL DE NOUX

Detective John Raven Beau watched two coroner's assistants carry the black body bag down the steps from the victim's front porch, down the brick walkway, through the black wrought-iron gate, to the white Coroner's Office van parked against the curb. They slid the body bag into the back and slammed the door.

Beau, standing six two, a lean one-eighty pounds, was thirty, a square-jawed man with dark brown hair and light brown eyes. The long sleeves of his white dress shirt were rolled up on his muscular forearms, his light blue tie loosened, and his nine-millimeter Beretta Model 92-F was snug in its black canvas holster on his right hip. A gold star-and-crescent New Orleans Police badge was clipped to his belt above the left front pocket of his navy blue suit pants.

"I was up on the pole all morning," said the man standing next to Beau. His name was Jerol Philiber, forty-eight years old with short black hair, skin as dark as oak bark, standing six feet even, weighing two-twenty, and wearing a blue denim work jacket and denim pants.

Beau copied Philiber's pertinent information in his notes, taking it from Philiber's driver's license and Community Cable-TV ID card, before handing them back to the cable installer.

"We're rewiring this whole part of St. Charles Avenue," Philiber volunteered. "I'm still not finished. Been here since six A.M."

Beau looked at the telephone pole ten feet from the victim's front gate, then up at the wires above, green metal box open where Philiber was working.

"Noticed her front door was cracked open," the cableman went on, Beau jotting quickly to keep up, letting the man talk. "When I came down for lunch, I saw the next-door neighbor in her front yard and started to ask about the house, but she ran inside like I was the bogeyman."

Beau looked into Philiber's eyes. Neither man said it, but the elderly woman neighbor was probably frightened by the large black man.

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"She called y'all, and I told the uniformed officer about the door."

Beau had already interviewed the first officer on the scene, who had knocked on the door, rung the doorbell, and gone inside with the neighbor lady. It took him eleven minutes to find the eighty-year-old victim's body in the hall closet.

"You said you're from Homicide. I take it she didn't die a natural death."

Beau nodded, still looking in the man's eyes. Philiber didn't look away, didn't even blink.

"Hey!" came a voice from the porch. Crime Lab Technician Ned Howland stood at the top step, evidence case in one hand, keys in the other. "Want me to lock the door?"

Beau raised a hand over his eyes to shield them from the bright sunlight. Although it was early winter and cool in New Orleans, it wasn't cold yet, especially beneath the strong sun.

"Hold on a second," Beau called back and crossed the brick walkway to the steps, counting them on the way up. Twenty-one concrete steps led up to the porch, which was actually a gallery with an overhang above supported by wooden columns and decorated with gingerbread trim. White, the entire house was painted white, even the window frames and door trim.

Howland handed the key chain with its two silver keys to Beau.

"Dusted them?"

"Of course." Howland picked up his camera case with his free hand. "Not a thing."

They'd found the keys inside the door, sitting in the lock. Beau carefully locked the half glass front door, checking the lock, which worked fine, then followed Howland down the steps.

"Can you leave me some evidence tape?" Beau asked as they moved through the gate. Howland stopped, reached into his evidence case, and tossed a partial roll of yellow-and-black plastic evidence tape, which wasn't adhesive tape, but an unbroken roll of plastic.

Beau closed the gate, tied the end of the evidence tape to the fence post next to the gate and extended the tape across the gate to the next fence post, leaving the roll next to the fence as he stepped back to Philiber, still standing on the sidewalk.

A streetcar rattled along the neutral ground in the center of St. Charles Avenue, curious faces looking toward Beau and the bright evidence tape. A little girl with a ponytail waved and Beau waved back and smiled. The girl ducked back in shyly.

"I see you have a way with the fairer sex." Philiber was trying to be friendly.

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"Only the ones who don't know better. Did you see anyone else around this morning?"

"Guy in a red car parked right where your van's leaving." Philiber pointed to Howland's Crime Lab van as it pulled away from the curb. "Opened his hood and worked under it before going up the steps and ringing the bell."

"He go in?"

"Nope. No answer, so he left. Came straight back to his car, tinkered under the hood for a minute, and got the car started and drove off."

Beau got a description of the man: white male, late twenties, tall, thin, with short blond hair. Car was a late-model red Olds or Pontiac.

"You see anything else?"

"Nope."

Beau thanked him and Philiber climbed back up the pole to finish his work, while Beau walked next door to the elderly lady who had gone into the victim's house with the reporting officer.

Louisa Smith, seventy-one years old, with thinning gray hair and a face lined with deep wrinkles, preferred speaking to Beau through a latched screen door. Her house was only a one-story brick home, looking like a track house from the suburbs, sandwiched between the larger homes along the 7800 block of St. Charles.

Understandably frightened, she spoke in a low voice, Beau having to pull the words from her. She knew the victim, but not well, didn't even know her last name, just knew her as Lily.

"She has a twin sister in California."

Beau had found the sister's name and number in Lily Chauchoin's address book, had already spoken with the sister, who'd told him about Lily's life.

"She didn't come outside," Louisa said. "She had her groceries delivered."

"From where?"

"DiMarco's Grocery. Around the corner."

Beau knew the place. A neighborhood grocery store still hanging on against the supermarket chains.

"Did you see anyone around Lily's the last couple days?"

"That big man on the telephone pole."

"Did he go near Lily's house?"

"No. I been watchin' him."

"You see anyone else?"

"Just the boy with the red car."

Yes, she saw the blond guy go up the steps to Lily's front door

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and saw him come down a minute later, then drive away. No, she knew of no suspicious characters around the neighborhood.

"I wonder who'll move in there now," Louisa said, moving to her left to look at the steps next door. "Some people think it's an antebellum house. But it was built after the Civil War."

"How do you know that?"

Lily had been talkative once, years ago, long before she became a "recluse," as Louisa described her.

"Your accent," Louisa said as Beau closed his notebook. "It isn't . . . I thought you were . . . Mexican."

"I'm half Oglala."

"Huh?"

"Lakota." No way that would register, so he relented, telling her the name the enemies of the Lakota, including the white man, gave to his mother's tribe. "Sioux. I'm half American Indian."

He thanked her and turned away.

"What's the other half?"

"Cajun. That's the accent you're hearing."

She didn't look like she believed a word.

Beau canvassed both sides of the house with the twenty-one steps, learning nothing of value. Returning to Lily Chauchoin's gate, Beau was approached by a newspaper reporter and a television reporter who was hurriedly trying to get her cameraman set up.

"No comment," he said, ignoring their questions as he untied the evidence tape, went in the gate, retied the tape, and climbed the steps, counting them again, like a mantra. He'd already checked the outside of the house with the crime lab technician, finding all windows locked, the back door locked, nothing amiss. He'd checked inside but wanted to take his time in a longer, second search.

Looking down from the gallery, he noted on his notepad, "lawn care." Someone was taking care of the lawn, which appeared freshly cut. The banana trees and azalea bushes along the sides of the house were well tended, as were the camellia bushes in the front yard.

Beau unlocked the front door and went in. He finally recognized the smell. Vanilla. He'd seen candles dotting the living room, small scented candles in glass cups. Standing in the foyer, he looked at the living room on the left, formal dining room on the right, stairs leading to the bedrooms upstairs.

The walls were lined with cardboard boxes stacked up to three feet, each filled, some with magazines, some with books, some with lampshades and other odds and ends. He followed

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the narrow path through the boxes into the dining room where the long mahogany table was almost completely covered with boxes. The end nearest the kitchen was bare, enough for one person to sit and eat.

Beau inched his way through the kitchen to the back steps and down into the first floor of the house, which served as a basement—because of its high water table, no one had underground basements in New Orleans, the only major American city built below sea level atop a vast marsh. He could barely make his way through rooms cluttered with old furniture and more boxes.

It took Beau an hour to check out the lower rooms, sifting through the accumulations of the eighty-year life of Lily Chauchoin, who had once been a princess at the Krewe of Momus Mardi Gras Ball, who had also graduated from Newcomb College, long since a part of Tulane University, who had taught at Sacred Heart Academy down St. Charles Avenue for forty-two years, according to Lily's lone sister.

He found a picture of Lily's husband upstairs in the master bedroom, a black-and-white photo in a wooden frame on the end table next to the double bed. The picture showed a plain-faced man in khakis. Lily's sister had explained that he was airborne, killed in Korea when the Chinese overran his outfit, November 1950.

Lily's jewelry box, overturned on the dresser, was dirty with black fingerprint powder, as were the drawers the burglar pulled out, tossing Lily's clothes across the floor. Lily's dresses, yanked from their hangers, littered the closet floor, as well as a dozen shoe boxes and shoes, mostly black and brown.

When he spotted the broken glass box under the bed, he knew he'd have to call the crime lab back to take a picture and dust it for prints. Nothing picked up fingerprints better than glass.

He found a color photo of Lily's son, who looked a lot like his father, only he was in fatigues and wore a helmet. Beau could see jungle in the background of the photo. The son was killed at Da Nang during the Tet Offensive, 1968.

Beau realized when he saw the son's room that it hadn't been disturbed, except for dusting, since the sixties, that the entire house had an old feeling. He went back through it and found nothing new, as if the house and its contents had been frozen in time. No microwave in the kitchen, no answering machine next to the phone, no home computer, no VCR.

He found hundreds of food coupons carefully clipped from the newspaper, generic drugs in the medicine cabinets, Lily Chauchoin's well-worn clothing, old sofas, mismatched lamps.

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Beau went back to Lily's purse, which he'd found in the kitchen cupboard, behind a can of flour.

He found nine dollars in cash and a checkbook but no credit cards, no bank debit card. Thumbing through her checkbook confirmed what Beau suspected. Although she lived in a large house on one of the most exclusive avenues in uptown New Orleans, although she kept the exterior of her home immaculate, even the lawn, she had little money for anything else. He carefully put everything back in the purse and put it back where she'd left it.

In the closet where Lily's body was found, Beau discovered another piece of glass, rectangular in shape. As he called Howland back to the scene, he bent over and saw the glass was actually the lid from the glass box upstairs.

After photographing them, Howland lifted three partial prints from the glass box beneath Lily's bed and one excellent thumb print from the glass lid from the closet. Beau thanked him for coming back so quickly.

"It's what I live for," Howland snarled, then smiled. "See you at the autopsy."

DiMarco's Grocery, along the first floor of a two-story wooden building painted pale blue, sat at the corner of Hampson and Burdette Streets. The smile on Sal DiMarco's face disappeared when Beau told him what had happened. Sixty-six years old, five seven, a hundred and forty pounds, with thick gray hair and a matching mustache, Sal's eyes teared up and he had to take a seat.

Beau leaned against the counter and accepted a Coke from Sal's son Joe, who was missing both hands and used old fashioned metal hooks, instead of prosthetic hands.

"Was a firefighter," Joe explained. "Lost both hands in a fire back in '61. In the French Quarter, thought we'd lose an entire block, but only lost two houses and two hands."

Joe delivered Lily's groceries. His last delivery was three days earlier. Lily would call in her order and he'd deliver it, but never went inside. Lily always met him on the back porch, always paid with cash, and always carried her own stuff in from the porch.

"Do you know what drugstore she used?" Beau chided himself for not copying the names of any pharmacy from the prescriptions in Lily's bathroom cabinet.

"Ours." Joe explained they had a pharmacist in the back. "I offered to carry the stuff in every time, but she never let me. Rich people are sometimes odd. She was very quiet, never really looked me in the eye, but I liked her." Joe, in his late forties, stood six

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three, two-eighty, balding, lifted his apron with the hook on his right hand and wiped tears from his eyes.

"You're from Homicide?"

Beau nodded, taking another sip of Coke.

"She was murdered?"

Beau nodded again.

"This is horrible," he said. "Absolutely horrible."

"How long was Lily a customer?"

Sal answered for his son. "Forty years. More. She used to come in till her son was killed in Vietnam. We been deliverin' ever since."

As Beau jotted the DiMarcos' contact information in his notes, Sal leaned on the counter and asked, "Did Lily suffer?"

Beau gave him the stare, the expressionless stare of his ancestors, those lean plains warriors who said little and showed no emotion in their faces, ever, even when dying at the hands of the white man.

The old man's eyes became wet again.

Beau thanked them for the Coke and left his business card, in case they heard anything. He spent the next four hours in a futile canvass of Hampson and the side streets around the house with the twenty-one steps.

Standing in front of Lily's gate in his tan suit pants, badge clipped to his belt, Beretta in the new beige canvas holster on his right hip, Beau removed the evidence tape he'd forgotten to remove the previous evening. He slipped on his extra-dark Ray·Ban sunglasses. Time to canvass.

Nine A.M., time people should be up. Beau had attended Lily's autopsy at six A.M., confirming the manner of death was homicide, the cause of death: asphyxia from ligature around her throat. The pathologist carefully removed the curtain cord from Lily's frail neck. Beau had already found the cord's source, a front room window. The pathologist set the time of death between four and eight P.M. the evening before the body was found.

Beau walked over to Louisa Smith's small brick home and rang the bell.

Louisa cracked open her door and peeked through the screen door. "What is it now?" She seemed more annoyed than frightened.

"I forgot to ask if you knew what lawn service Lily used?"

"Lawn service?"

"Yes, who took care of Lily's yard?" Beau moved to the side and pointed toward Lily's yard.

"I've been using the same gardeners for twenty years, but Lily

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used people going up and down with lawn mowers. Kids sometimes. Men too, but nobody steady."

Beau asked for the name of Louisa's gardener and had to explain he needed to speak with anyone remotely connected to the neighborhood.

"Wait a second." Louisa shut the door and came back a minute later with a card she pressed against the screen door and told Beau he could take down the information, but she couldn't understand why.

The lawn service was in Metairie. Something to follow up later.

"Have you seen anyone from the electric company, gas company, phone company around lately?" Beau had already made a note to check with those companies for any recent service in the area because you never knew, they may have a murderer working for them, or if they came around, they might have seen something.

Louisa's eyes narrowed. "That man up on the pole yesterday."

Beau leaned closer. "Are you all right, ma'am?"

"Of course. Except for you bothering me."

Beau thanked her again and she huffed, "With all Lily's money, I don't know why she didn't have a regular lawn man."

He rolled his sleeves up and continued his canvass of Lily's neighbors.

Three doors from Lily's house, at another white house, this one with twelve steps leading up to its front gallery, Beau found Sally Branson: forty-four years old, tall and thin, with light brown skin, hair cut in a short afro, brown eyes, and a ready smile. Sally wore a white maid's dress and white shoes.

Her smile disappeared when she spotted Beau's badge. "I saw it on TV last night. Poor woman."

Beau went through his questions, coming up with only one new piece of information. Sally didn't want to cast suspicions on someone who might be innocent, but there was a man who'd been going around, knocking on doors, asking about odd jobs.

"What's he look like?"

Sally described a white male in his forties, a little shorter than Sally's five ten, with short brown hair and tattoos on both arms.

"He was polite, but I didn't like his eyes."

"What about his eyes?"

"They were set too wide apart." Sally put a hand in front of her mouth and shrugged. "Sounds silly, but my gramma always said be wary of men with their eyes set too wide apart. Too much trash going on inside the head of those kinda men."

"Did you catch this man's name?"

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Sally hadn't. She apologized for "generalizing" about the man because of an old gramma's tale.

"No need to apologize," Beau said. "My mother's full of such notions."

"Really?" Sally's eyes lit up. "About what?"

Beau shrugged. "The White Eyes."

"Who?"

"White folk."

Sally's head tilted to the side.

"Especially men in blue riding horses."

Sally put a hand on her hip, a mischievous look on her face. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Beau took a moment to tell her about the Battle of the Greasy Grass, when his great-great-grand uncle Crazy Horse went up against Custer and his boys in a battle the whites called Custer's Last Stand, better known, now in the twenty-first century, as the Battle of the Little Big Horn.

Sally's mouth formed an "O" as Beau passed her a business card and asked if she thought of anything else, to call.

At a small diner on Hampson Street called Café Bayonne, Beau discovered a great steakburger meal and the name of the man with the tattoos—Lee Rumbold.

Waitress Ann Falimy, mid thirties, five five, on the heavy side, with short brown hair and a lean face with a pointy chin, described Lee Rumbold as a "pretty regular customer the last few weeks."

The well-seasoned steakburger, the Bayonne Burger Special, came with curly fries and a chocolate malt. Between juicy bites and Ann's waiting on other customers, Beau learned that Lee Rumbold sometimes parked his lawn mower and edger outside when he came in.

"I think he does odd jobs for people around here. He's nice. Quiet."

"Do you know where he lives?"

Ann wasn't sure but thought Rumbold lived in one of the cheap apartment houses up Hampson on the other side of Carrollton.

"We've only spoken once for more than a minute. Couple days ago. He came after the lunch rush."

"He mention anything about working up on St. Charles?"

"Nothing specific, but he did complain how rich people didn't pay well. He preferred cutting smaller yards away from St. Charles."

Ann stepped away for another customer and Beau went back to

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his burger. When she eased back, he asked through a mouthful, "He ever mention any elderly women customers?"

"No. As I said. Nothing specific."

He left Sally a tip to match the bill and his business card. "If Lee Rumbold comes in, call this number and tell the dispatcher for me to 10-19 Bayonne. I'll know to come right away."

"Should I be afraid of Lee?"

Beau shrugged. "He could be completely innocent."

Sally chuckled. "Nobody's completely innocent." She winked at Beau as he stepped out.

Lee Rumbold stayed at the Capri Apartments on Hampson, half a block from Carrollton Avenue. Six apartments had been carved from what once was a southern mansion with six columns out front. Two more apartments had been created from the garage. Lee occupied the lower garage apartment and wasn't in. The manager didn't seem concerned, having a cop ask about a tenant.

"You wanna see his lease?"

Beau was tempted, but if this Lee was involved, he'd better get a search warrant.

"If you could tell me his date of birth, that would help."

Sitting back out in his unmarked black Chevy, Beau ran Lee Rumbold through the police computer, discovering the man had two arrests for disturbing the peace by being drunk in public.

Beau went back into the Capri to use the phone to call the Crime Lab and ask to have Rumbold's prints compared to the prints from the scene.

"Any luck with the other prints?" Beau asked.

"No. Everyone came back negative."

Beau mentally crossed off cableman Jerol Philiber as well as the nine known burglars arrested in the area over the last two years. He'd asked the Crime Lab to compare their prints to the ones lifted from Lily Chauchoin's glass box.

"There he is now." The manager pointed outside. Beau caught a glimpse of a man pushing a lawn mower around the corner toward the garage apartment. Beau followed him, catching him before he got inside.

"Police," Beau said, showing his credentials. "How's it going today, Mr. Rumbold?"

Rumbold was thirty-nine, stood around five nine, about one-fifty, with short brown hair that looked as if Rumbold had cut it himself.

Looking around Beau, batting his wide-set brown eyes, Rumbold shrugged. "I'm okay, I guess."

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Tattoos ran down both his arms, an anchor and MOTHER on his left arm, a sailing ship and USN on the right arm.

"I'd like to come in and talk with you," Beau said in a flat voice, not friendly but not unfriendly.

Rumbold closed the door of his apartment, said, "You can't go in."

"Then let's go to my place." Beau smiled now, but not friendly at all.

Rumbold insisted on locking up his lawn mower and edger in the small wooden shed attached to the back of the apartments and followed Beau back to his car.

"You have any weapons on you?" Beau asked, opening the back door of his car and patting Rumbold down quickly. No knives, no guns.

"No." Rumbold's voice sounded tired.

He never said another word all the way to the Detective Bureau.

Beau's former partner, Detective Jodie Kintyre, sat at her desk, which abutted Beau's in the Homicide squad room. Jodie was thirty-six, stood five seven, slim, with blond hair cut in a page boy. She wore a white blouse and black slacks, her weapon in a shoulder rig hanging beneath her left arm. A blond-haired civilian sat in the folding chair next to her desk. He looked to be about twenty.

Beau winked at Jodie as he led Rumbold into one of the small, windowless interview rooms and sat him behind the small table, leaving him to simmer for a half hour.

Jodie joined Beau at the coffee pot, her catlike hazel eyes more narrow than usual as she nodded back toward her desk. "He turned himself in."

"For what?"

"Said you were looking for him."

Beau realized this was the blond guy with the red car and smiled, stirring his coffee as he approached their desks. Beau didn't say a word, letting the man explain how a TV cableman told him Beau was looking for him, how he was a student at Tulane, and how his car breaks down just about every day.

"I rang the doorbell but didn't go inside. Really."

Beau secured the man's driver's license and ran him on the computer. No arrests, but he'd been fingerprinted. Tulane ROTC. So Beau had his prints compared to the ones from the scene. For the next twenty minutes the three sat and talked, Jodie smiling as the young man tried to flirt with her, awkwardly, nervously.

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"Olds or Pontiac," Beau asked.

"Huh? Oh. Pontiac." He seemed to relax slightly.

When the phone rang, Beau snatched it up before the first ring was finished. It was the Crime Lab.

"Bingo," said Howland. "Got a hit. Wanna guess who?"

"Rumbold."

"Bingo again," Howland said. "Good work, Detective." He was teasing now and Beau was feeling good. He asked Jodie if she could take a brief statement from her young admirer as Beau headed for the interview room.

Turning on the video recorder, set on its tripod in the corner of the room, Beau read Rumbold his Miranda rights from a waiver-of-rights form, and Rumbold initialed next to each "right."

No problem, Rumbold contended. "Sure, I'll talk to you."

Beau started with the preliminaries, Rumbold's age, place of birth: Chicago. The usual background information revealed Lee Rumbold was a Vietnam veteran, U.S. Navy, in-country, gunner's mate on a swift boat, a plastic patrol boat along the Mekong Delta.

"How long have you been cutting Lily Chauchoin's grass?"

"Who?"

"The lady who lived in the house with the twenty-one steps out front. St. Charles Avenue."

"Only cut it three or four times."

"You ever go inside her house?"

"Nope."

Beau kept his face expressionless as he went on, letting Rumbold paint himself into a corner he'd never get out of, letting him explain his whereabouts for the last three days.

"So the last time you cut Mrs. Chauchoin's grass was three days ago?"

"Yes."

"Do you know what happened to her?"

"Nope."

"Don't read the papers much, do you?"

"Nope."

Beau watched the man's eyes as he told him, "She was murdered."

"No." Rumbold blinked, then looked down at the tabletop and fidgeted as he sat in the hard wooden folding chair with its front legs shaved down a half inch to make the interviewee lean forward uncomfortably.

"Her house was burgled," Beau continued. "Ransacked."

Rumbold sat up and shook his head. "Why would anybody do that. She didn't have any money."

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Beau continued staring into Rumbold's eyes. "She pay you in cash?"

"Yep."

"She tell you she didn't have any money?"

"Huh?"

"How'd you know she had no money?"

Rumbold sat back and looked up into the video camera lens. Beau loved it when they did that, looking right at the jury with "guilty" written across the face.

"Everyone, even her next door neighbor of forty-two years, thought she had money." Beau let that sink in a moment before repeating his question, "How'd you know she had no money?"

Rumbold swallowed loud enough for Beau to hear.

"All right, let me try another question. If you never went inside the house, how did your fingerprint end up on the glass box next to the body?"

Rumbold started shaking his head, putting his elbows up on the table, clamping his hands against his temples.

"We know what happened," Beau said. "You wanna tell us how it happened?"

Rumbold took his time. Didn't mean to kill her, of course. After cutting the grass, Lily brought him some tea in a paper cup, a paper cup. All the money in that big house and he wasn't good enough to drink from a glass. That's what sparked him to shove his way in and "rob the place."

Unfortunately, Lily Chauchoin panicked. "I just wanted to shut her up," he said.

As the statement concluded, Beau filled out the arrest form, charging Rumbold with first-degree murder. He looked into Rumbold's eyes for a long moment and remembered what Sally Branson had said about being wary of men with wide-set eyes. "Too much trash going on inside," she'd said. And he remembered Ann Falimy saying, "Nobody's completely innocent."

It was Beau's job to prove Rumbold was completely guilty. After booking Rumbold, Beau would get a search warrant for the man's apartment, certain he'd find something belonging to Lily there.

"Would you like a cup of coffee?" Beau asked, as he led Rumbold out.

"Yeah."

Beau pointed to the coffee area. "All we have is Styrofoam."

At ten the following morning, as Beau pulled up in front of Lily Chauchoin's, a white van pulled in behind him and Jerol Philiber climbed out. They met next to the wrought-iron gate.

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"That student come and talk to you?"

"Yeah. You read the paper this morning?"

"Didn't mean to interfere," Philiber said. "I see you caught the killer."

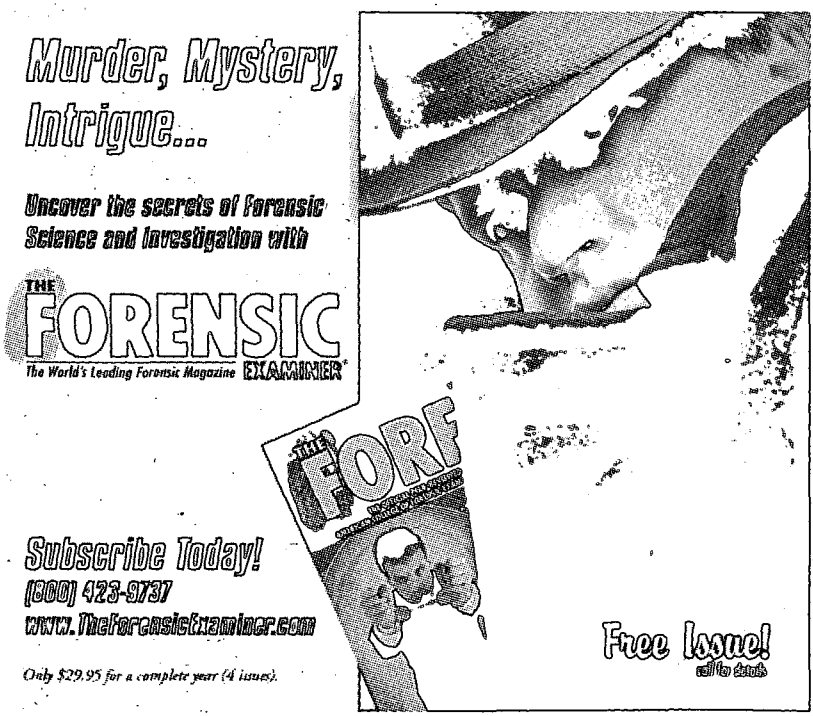
The door opened and another version of Lily Chauchoin stepped out on Lily's gallery. Her sister from California waited for Beau. She raised a hand and waved tentatively. She was waiting for the details of her sister's murder, a job Beau never relished, but knew how to handle.

He thanked Philiber again. "Nosy citizens are appreciated. And you didn't interfere at all."

Philiber seemed relieved, shot Beau a smile as they shook hands. Beau opened the gate and told the cableman, "Keep your eyes open."

"I will."

Beau crossed to the steps and counted them on the way up, "One, two, three . . ." Like a mantra. ☙



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One for the Road

GIGI VERNON

Marilyn drained her gin, then carefully set the glass down on the bar, which seemed to bob like a rum-running boat on a choppy crossing of the Detroit River.

"Bottoms up," the swell-looking gangster on the bar stool next to her said with a wink.

With difficulty, her numb, clumsy fingers screwed a cigarette into her holder and, without turning away from his soothing smile of admiration, she groped behind her for the lighter in her purse. Her fingers pawed at thin air. She turned to look. No purse on the counter. Or on the empty seat next to her, or in the darkness on the floor of the speakeasy.

The cigarette and its holder flopped out of her mouth and rolled away. She turned back to the gangster extending a lit match to her and socked him in the arm. "Very funny. Give it back," she said, her tongue and lips thick on the words.

"Give what?" he said with a cocky grin, then blew out the match flame suggestively.

"My purse, numskull." She slid off the barstool.

Ray would kill her if she'd lost the protection payoff to the cops. He'd send one of his suits to rub her out and she'd be dead by tomorrow. Maybe he'd somehow already discovered the loss and had already sent someone. A vision of her bullet-riddled corpse floating in the river came to her.

She belted the creep again, then groped him, trying to search him, keeping her feet under her with difficulty.

Grinning, his hands held up as if he were under arrest, he said, "Hey, if you want to get fresh with me just say so."

"Give it back," her voice rose into a screech. She whacked him, trying to push him off the bar stool.

At the commotion, the jazz band faltered into silence, as did the frenetic tapping of Charleston-jiggling couples.

"Ray doesn't like his molls messed with!" she heard herself accuse the startled spectators. She wondered if everyone already knew she was no longer Ray's. She glared, or at least tried to glare,

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Daniel Galanaugh

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attempting to focus through a murk before her eyes, almost as if she were already at the bottom of the muddy river. She swayed in the hush, waiting for someone to confess.

No one stepped forward. Instead, the crowd parted for the head bouncer, Ralph, a middle-aged man, beefy, with bushy eyebrows and mustache and a missing front tooth. He frowned, annoyance crinkling his broken nose. "Marilyn, Marilyn," he crooned in a low voice. "Pipe down. What is it with you? You gotta make a spectacle of yourself everywhere you go?" He snapped his fingers at the band.

A bass player tentatively plucked a string and the rest of the band answered. They revived the interrupted tune and the dancers caught the rhythm. Conversations and drinks were picked up again.

With a hand to her elbow, Ralph helped her onto a bar stool. "You gotta problem? Tell Ralph all about it," he crooned.

"My problem, Ralph," she said sarcastically, "is that you let two-bit grifters in this joint."

"This is a dandy speakeasy."

"Oh yeah? Somebody snatched my purse while I was sitting here at the bar minding my own business," she spluttered with anger and gin.

"You don't say?"

She turned to the bartender, a fat, older man, his bald head as smooth and gleaming as his bland, doughy face. "Joe, who'd you serve next to me?"

"Don't you know yourself, Marilyn? Maybe you ought to take it easy on the booze."

"Give a girl a break," she snapped.

"No one ever sat down next to you," the young rumrunner chimed in with a wink. "I would have noticed the competition."

She elbowed him away.

"Are you sure you had your purse when you came in?" Ralph the bouncer asked. "You were pretty sauced."

" 'Course I had it," she said, slurring, thinking back, not so sure even as she said it.

"I never saw a purse," Joe offered as he wiped a glass clean.

She'd come directly from the hotel and Ray. The schmuck. Had she had it then? Her head was so fuzzy. She shouldn't have drunk so much. She pressed the heel of her hand to her forehead, trying to force clarity back. She'd be dead tomorrow if she didn't get that purse back. Ray would never cut her any slack now.

"Ralph, give me a few bucks for cab fare? Ray won't mind," she pleaded.

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The bartender hit a key on the cash register, a bell tinkled, and the wooden drawer shot open. "Anything for the boss." He counted a couple of bills into her palm.

She pulled on the fur coat that Ray had once given her, then left, wobbling between slanting walls and floor toward the shifting door.

Outside, a violent spring wind off the river howled through the unforgiving granite canyons of the Detroit streets. She wrapped her fur coat around her and breathed deeply, hoping the chill, grimy air would clear the muck from her head. The uniformed cop paid to turn a blind eye to the speakeasy tipped his cap to her. "Miss Marilyn."

"Even'," she mumbled unsteadily, the wind pushing at her, making it impossible to stand still. A trolley rumbled by. In too much of a hurry to be inching along jammed in with businessmen, she let it pass.

"Would you be needing a cab?" he asked.

"Yeah, and be quick about it," she said, attempting to snap her fingers unsuccessfully.

He whistled and an ancient Model-T ducked out of traffic and rattled to a stop. Negotiating the cab door proved an impossible challenge and she was glad of the cop's help.

"The Book Cadillac Hotel," she told the driver, a kid who didn't look old enough for long pants, much less driving.

"Right away, Miss Marilyn," he chirped, small behind the big wheel.

They all knew her as Ray's moll. If they didn't know already, soon they would know how Ray had dumped her. Then they would hear how she had disappeared, and some time after that, they would hear how her corpse had been found in the river.

With a series of pops that sounded like gunshots, the kid driver pulled out into the chaotic late-afternoon traffic.

In the back seat, she realized one of her silk stockings was sagging around her ankle. Stupid things. Viciously, she pulled it up, and after several attempts to manipulate fingers that had turned fat and sausagelike, she straightened the seam, and re-rolled it above her knee, tearing a gaping hole in the silk in the process. "Hell's bells," she muttered.

Surveying the congested disorder of vehicles and pedestrians in front of the Book Cadillac Hotel, James O'Neill admired the pale, spring sunshine slanting down into the street, warming and softening the granite of the tall buildings.

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The flash of a pretty ankle caught his eye as a flapper in a fur coat clambered into a cab, dropping her purse on the sidewalk in the process. Too late he rushed forward. The cab nosed into traffic as a boy pounced, scooped up the purse, and was about to make off with it.

"Pardon me, lad." O'Neill grabbed the young thief's collar and relieved him of the purse. "Would you care to show me your name on that purse?"

Grimacing with the effort, the boy squirmed until he broke free, then dove into the river of black-bodied cars tearing through the square.

For an instant, O'Neill considered giving chase, then decided it was already a lost cause. From an island in the center of the boiling, churning river of traffic, the blue-capped boy made a rude gesture at him, then continued nimbly dodging automobiles until he reached the safety of the other side of the street and disappeared.

O'Neill loosened the purse's drawstrings. Inside was a wad of bills, a flask, and a derringer, but nothing identifying the owner. He pulled the purse closed.

A doorman in uniform stood stonily at attention in front of the revolving glass door of the hotel, his eyes alert, taking in the scene. O'Neill approached. The man's alarmed gaze skittered away from the bulge of a gun in O'Neill's pocket.

"Might you know that young lady, sir?" O'Neill asked.

Startled at being spoken to, the doorman eyed him suspiciously, not recognizing him and trying to figure out where he fit in. The doorman's gaze flitted from sidewalk to street then back again, watching for trouble.

O'Neill waited patiently, letting the man take his time.

Finally, the doorman glanced over his shoulder at the hotel one last time, screwed his face up with the effort of coming to a decision, then blasted an answer as if it were a painful belch, "Sure I know. Everyone knows her. That was Marilyn."

"Marilyn Massie?" O'Neill's pulse quickened at this bit of luck. That explained the purse's contents. "And might you happen to know where I could find her?"

Before he could reply, two dapper men emerged from the hotel and gestured for a cab. Out of the corner of his eye, O'Neill sized up the men, members of the Purple Gang emerging from their headquarters in the hotel. Young, sleek, arrogant. Too arrogant, fortunately, to take notice of him.

A whistle brought a shiny new Packard to the curb. The doorman rushed to help the men climb in. The car leapt out into traf-

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fic and the doorman returned. "Big tippers," he said disparagingly, displaying the nickel in his palm before pocketing it. Back at his station at the door, a little less wary, the doorman asked, "Who wants to know about Marilyn?"

Shrugging nonchalantly, O'Neill held up a five dollar bill. "She dropped her purse. Call me a good Samaritan. I want to return it to her." He raised the purse and gave it a shake for emphasis with a sheepish grin.

A smile tweaked the doorman's unexpressive mouth. "She probably went to the club. That's where she spends most of her evenings if she's not here."

"The club?" O'Neill asked, not sure which of the Purples' blind pigs he meant.

The man's eyes widened slightly in surprise, and his glance shifted again to the concealed gun. "You new to Detroit?"

O'Neill nodded.

The doorman looked away and muttered under his breath as if he were a spy relaying a password, "The Kibbutzer Club. On Woodward, near Columbia. Rap three times."

O'Neill shook the man's hand, slipping the five spot to him. "Appreciate it."

At the Book Cadillac Hotel, Marilyn pushed through the glass door and entered a lobby plush with furniture and bright with the light of many-tiered chandeliers, the well-dressed guests as new and shiny with unrespectable wealth as the lobby.

One of the house dicks, a front man for the Purple Gang on Ray's payroll, leaned over the coat check counter toward the girl behind it, his back to her, engrossed in his flirtation.

Hoping to escape his notice, Marilyn quickly turned for the hotel restaurant, almost colliding with a pillar that hadn't been there a moment ago.

Before she got far, she heard the dick's voice behind her, "Hey! I thought I told you to get lost after the stink you made last time."

She stopped and faced him, the sudden movement causing the room to spin uncontrollably.

Heavy jawed with small, stupid eyes, he turned to the coat check girl and laughed at his own joke. "Get it? Stink." He mimed emptying a bottle into his mouth. "Stink!" he repeated, and held his nose at an imagined stench.

The chubby, gap-toothed girl darted a superior smile at Marilyn before she turned back to her work.

"I left my purse here," Marilyn said, shaping every syllable carefully.

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"You didn't leave nothing here except your dignity, toots. If you have any left," he said.

She jammed her hands into her coat pockets. Like viewing pictures on a stereoscope, Ray's birthday party came back to her. Arriving late. Ray in a booth surrounded by his Purple Gang. That hussy of a blonde next to him, wrapped around him like a bun on a wiener. Ray's smile of unconcern that she'd caught him cheating on her. Two-timing sonofabitch. She was glad that she'd thrown her birthday gift, a bottle of expensive cologne from Paris, France, at him. The bottle burst on the booth's upholstery, spraying scent over the couple. It had been well worth being thrown out for.

"You're a real comedian. You should be on the stage," she said sarcastically, a hand on her hip. "If you don't mind, I'm going to miss the show and go look in the restaurant for my purse."

"Oh no." He approached, wagging his finger at her like a schoolteacher. "I'm under strict orders. You don't go near that restaurant again."

"Get that finger out of my face before I take it off," she snapped, not worrying that the words came tumbling out in a sloppy jumble now. "What's the matter? Is Ray still celebrating his birthday?" She tried stepping around him, but he easily moved to stop her.

"No, your stinkbomb cleared 'em out pretty good." He chuckled at the memory, then became serious. "Not that Ray's whereabouts is any concern of yours no more, but he's gone." He folded his arms over his chest, blocking her path.

She crossed her own arms over her chest, then took a sudden step back as she lost her balance. "I'm not leaving until I get my purse."

He grabbed her arm. "You'll leave when I tell you. Which is now." He dragged her toward the door.

She shook him off. "Take your hand off me or I'll make a ruckus and bring the house down."

He knew she would, too. He glanced around as if he realized for the first time they were in a lobby full of guests, then released her. "Okay, okay. I'll take a look for you, if you promise to be quiet and go outside to wait."

Doubtful, she nodded. She bounced against pillars and walls until she found herself standing under the awning outside. The doorman was nowhere to be seen. Angry humiliation burned in her eyes at the memory of Ray's treatment. "Got a smoke?" she asked a kid hanging around the door, probably hoping to be asked to run a message. Her mouth was dry, too. She could have used a pull from the flask she carried in her purse.

His blue cap low over his eyes, the kid dug in the pocket of his

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dungarees and produced a mashed packet. He fished a cigarette out and grudgingly handed it to her.

Before she could light it, the house dick showed up, his hands empty. "Not there," he said.

"Did you—?"

"I turned the place upside down. Not there."

"That little tramp—"

"Marilyn, why don't you use that pretty little head of yours," he poked at the curls of her bob with a finger, "instead of soaking it? You didn't stay more than two minutes. You didn't sit down. Ergo, it follows that you didn't leave no purse here, unless you threw it at someone?" he ended with a question.

She shook her head. A bad idea. She staggered as a wave of dizziness assaulted her.

"Think about it." He struck a match and lit her cigarette for her. "It's gotta be someplace else."

She took a long drag to steady herself, then exhaled. He was right.

"Where were you before you came here?" he asked.

"Hudson's Department Store."

"Maybe you left it there."

The streets near Woodward and Columbia were glutted with cars and it took O'Neill a while to find a parking space. He squeezed into a space some blocks away, climbed out, and walked along the street looking for telltale signs. A plain sturdy wooden door with a peephole had to be the Kibbutzer Club.

He hesitated before entering, touching the gun in his pocket. Maybe this wasn't such a great idea after all. It could go wrong fast.

A barrel-chested patrolman strolling his beat, his hands crossed behind his back, tossed a pleasant greeting to him, "Afternoon, sir." A puzzled grin spread across his face as he saw the purse O'Neill carried.

"Afternoon, Officer." Sheepishly, O'Neill held the purse up. "I'm wondering if you might happen to know a young lady by the name of Marilyn Massie."

The patrolman stiffened and turned watchful, as his gaze lit on the bulge of the gun. "What do you want with Miss Marilyn?"

"She dropped her purse."

The tension in the patrolman's eyes and mouth eased. "I saw her a few minutes ago."

O'Neill nodded, straightened his shoulders, took a deep breath, and headed for the door of the club.

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The patrolman pinched his sleeve. "I don't believe you want to go in there, sir."

O'Neill knew he didn't, but he pretended surprise. "I don't?"

"No," the patrolman said firmly, with a meaningful glance at the gun in his pocket, "you don't. Besides, if it's Miss Marilyn you're looking for, she's not there now. Left not five minutes ago."

Annoyed, O'Neill sighed. "In a cab?" he asked.

The officer nodded.

"I don't suppose you overheard the address she gave?"

"Can't say I do. Sorry, sir." He drifted backwards, then turned and continued his leisurely patrol of the sidewalk.

Perhaps she'd realized she'd lost her purse at the hotel and returned. It was worth a try.

A few minutes' walk bumping against pedestrians on the sidewalk like a billiard ball on a table brought Marilyn to Hudson's Department Store a few blocks away from the hotel. She pushed through the doors of the department store cautiously, ready to make a bolt if one of the floor dicks the store crawled with spotted her.

Inside, she surveyed the women's clothing department on the first floor. Shoppers, mostly women, a few with bored children in tow, grazed the merchandise. No sign of a dick. Careful of her balance and her surroundings, she wound her way through racks of dresses and cosmetic counters toward the perfume.

Shifts had changed and a different salesgirl stood behind an array of glittering bottles. Marilyn had fully intended to buy the cologne earlier. She had the money and she would have purchased it if she hadn't had to wait so danged long in a herd of housewives. She had already been late for Ray's birthday party. It had been quicker to pocket a bottle and scoot out.

Mustering all her politeness, she addressed the salesgirl, "I think I may have left my purse here earlier today."

"Lost and found—the fourteenth floor," the girl shot back, looking down her nose like she was better than Marilyn because she had a job in a lousy department store.

Marilyn opened her mouth for a retort, but the girl intercepted her. "Elevators—in the back of the building."

She looked in the direction the girl indicated and saw a man in a suit striding purposely toward her, either a floor dick or a Purple sent by Ray to whack her. She bolted around the counter, spotted a door with a sign marked STAIRS, flung it open, and rushed up a flight. No footsteps sounded below. Her head spinning and her stomach roiling, she collapsed on a concrete step, fighting a wave of gin-induced nausea. She took off her fur coat and dabbed the

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beads of sweat from her forehead with a crumpled handkerchief she found in her pocket.

When the nausea passed, she opened the door and threaded her way through housewares to the elevator. She rode to the fourteenth floor, smoothing her hair and straightening her hat.

When it stopped, she stepped out into a corridor swarming with clerks. She hoped she was less conspicuous without the fur coat on. She stopped a secretary hugging folders to her flat chest. "Lost and found?" she asked.

"In there," the woman replied, pointing to a door marked DETECTIVES.

"Hell's bells," Marilyn cursed under her breath. But there was nothing for it. She had to have that purse. Screwing up her courage, she strode to the door and entered. Instead of a posse of detectives waiting to arrest her, she entered a quiet, bland office. A large woman sat behind an enormous desk that almost filled a cramped reception area. The nameplate on the desk read MISS SIMMONS.

"Is this lost and found? I'm looking for my purse," Marilyn asked, finding she didn't have to work so hard at making the words clear now.

"Let me check." Miss Simmons eased herself up from her chair and waddled to a filing cabinet in the corner. "What did it look like?"

"Brown leather with a drawstring."

Miss Simmons opened a drawer and pulled out a purse. "Is this it?"

"No. Let me look." Half a dozen limp, deflated purses filled the drawer, but none of them were hers.

"Sorry. Would you like to leave a name in case it turns up tomorrow?" Miss Simmons returned to her desk and extended pen and paper toward her.

Tomorrow? She'd be dead by tomorrow. She shook her head. She rode the elevator down and drifted through the aisles toward the street entrance like the ghost she would soon be.

An arm grabbed her from behind. "Back again? So soon?" It was the same store dick that had been stationed near the perfume counter on her earlier visit, a big, raw-boned guy who reeked of Ivory soap. "For your information, Miss Lightfingers, a bottle of very expensive cologne disappeared on your last visit."

"You're accusing me?" She yanked her sleeve from his grasp, then made a show of slipping on her fur coat. "I can afford anything I want in this joint." Indignation reawakened the slur. "That pisswater you're trying to pass off as perfume? I wouldn't take it if you were giving it away." She adjusted the collar of her coat haughtily.

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"Obviously we weren't giving it away." He glared back.

There was nothing he could do about it now and they both knew it. She cocked her head to one side and looked him over. "Hey, you're a dick," she baited him. "Maybe you can figure out what happened to my purse when I was here. I think one of your customers stole it right under your nose."

He cocked his head, meeting her challenge. "Could be. We get a lot of grifters here."

"Did you happen to notice whether I had it with me?"

"Can't say I did. You were making a pretty good getaway at the time." He put his fists on his waist. "How about if I escort you to the door just so neither one of us loses something else this time?"

"You again!" The doorman at the Book Cadillac Hotel chuckled at O'Neill. "You're a dogged one!" He glanced around, as if he were nervous of being overheard. "You missed her at the Kibbutzer Club because she came back here."

"Obliged." O'Neill made to push through the revolving glass door.

The doorman yanked his sleeve. "Just a minute, buddy. She's not here now. She left. Well, you might say she was shown out. Asked to leave, so to speak."

"I see." O'Neill frowned. "Cab?" he asked and sighed.

"Not this time. She headed down the street."

"Then I might catch her?" He turned on his heel.

"Maybe. That way." The doorman pointed in the opposite direction.

"Just in case, where does she live?" he asked.

The doorman hesitated, glancing around.

O'Neill produced another five spot.

The doorman plucked the bill from his fingers. "21 Second Avenue."

He tipped his homburg in thanks.

That left only the bank. Clarity creeping back, Marilyn strode down the street to the First National where she had gone to get dough for Ray's cologne.

The bank dick, a slim man with a thin mustache that he thought made him look swank, blocked the door, a fistful of keys in his hands.

The door refused to open. Locked. She banged on the glass.

The little man held up his wristwatch and pointed to its face. Five o'clock, closing time.

She yelled through the glass, "Did I leave my purse here?"

He shook his head.

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"Did I have a purse with me when I left?"

"Sure you had one. You socked me with it," he yelled back at her, rubbing his scrawny arm.

Then where was it? She stepped away from the door in a daze. Stone sober now, she wandered aimlessly down the street torrential with office workers heading for home, huddling into her coat, the wind whipping tears into her eyes.

Mentally she retraced her steps. She'd taken money from the bank and walked to Hudson's. Had she stopped anywhere? No. She hadn't been tempted as there were no speakeasies in the neighborhood. That's what flasks were for anyway.

She'd gone into Hudson's with the purse, but had she come out with it? Maybe. She'd then walked to the Book Cadillac Hotel without stopping except for a few more swigs, arriving in more of a fuddle than she'd intended. She'd stayed at the hotel only for a few moments. From Ray's birthday celebration at the hotel, in a drunken fury, she'd called a cab to take her to the club where she'd realized she'd lost the purse. The cab! She'd left it in the cab!

Abruptly she stopped and a stocky businessman slammed into her. She forced herself to focus on remembering the cab or the driver's face. Nothing came to her. Useless. Gone forever. It was all a gin-soaked blur.

Now some cabbie was gleefully spending the five C-notes intended for the cops that some cursing, corked flapper had left in a purse on his back seat. And some cop was wondering where the payoff was that she was supposed to have delivered at noon. And by now, some trigger was searching for her with orders to bump her off.

O'Neill hurried down the sidewalk packed with workers and businessmen on their way home. Several times he thought he glimpsed a dark bob or a fur coat ahead which could have been Marilyn, but each time he caught up to the woman, it wasn't her.

He gave up after twenty minutes. Might as well try her at home.

At the nearest trolley stop, he boarded, and jumped off at the corner of Highland and Second Avenue at a stylish new apartment building. He entered expecting to find a doorman, but no one seemed to be about. According to the mailboxes, her apartment was on the third floor. He climbed the stairs and rang the doorbell. Silence. He waited and rang again. When no answer came, he left.

Marilyn didn't know how long she wandered, anticipating a bullet in the back or from the window of a passing jalopy. As the sunset reddened the sky, she found herself near a lunchroom the

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Licavoli Gang, rivals to the Purples, sometimes frequented. The lunchroom's windows spilled light into the spring dusk. The dinner crowd had come and gone and the place was deserted except for a young couple at a corner table.

"Gimme a cup of coffee," she said as she climbed tiredly onto a stool, her feet throbbing in her heels.

The skinny waitress set a cup down and poured.

Marilyn sipped at the dark brew. From now on, coffee, black coffee was the strongest drink she would take.

It was all her own doing. She should never have got mixed up with Ray, or the Purples, or the hooch. She should have stayed in Lansing where she belonged and married a decent, law-abiding boy who met with her parents' approval. Tears of regret and terror burned her eyes and trickled down her cheeks. She swatted at them angrily and sniffed.

"Better fix your face, doll," the waitress suggested in a kind voice, and hitched a thumb at the counter-length mirror on the wall behind her.

In the mirror, Marilyn saw that her eyeliner and mascara had run, leaving corpselike black smudges under her eyes.

The waitress set a stack of paper napkins on the counter next to her.

"Thanks," Marilyn said, smiling at her own self-pity, and wiped the makeup off.

Maybe she could disappear. If she took a train tonight to some small town out West and took a new name and found a job, maybe she could escape Ray's unrelenting vengeance. She eyed the waitress in her pink uniform. If she had to, she could sling hash as well as the next girl.

The door opened and in the mirror she saw a fresh-faced young gangster, trim and well polished, enter.

She huddled over her coffee cup and pulled her hat down over her face, hoping to make herself inconspicuous.

The click of his footsteps stopped next to her, his polished shoes and the bulge of a gun in his pocket visible under the crook of his arm.

She cringed, waiting to be dragged off the stool into a waiting car outside.

"Excuse me, miss, might you be Marilyn Massie?" he asked, his voice melodic with an Irish brogue.

"Yes," she said into her coffee in a subdued, humble voice. If she pushed him aside and ran, how far would she get? He looked fit. Would he shoot her down in the back if she fled? The place was empty. He'd kill her first, then the waitress and the young couple, the only witnesses.

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"You're a hard lass to pin down. I've been looking for you all over town. You dropped this," he laid her purse on the counter, "when you got into a cab outside of the Book Cadillac Hotel."

Without looking at him, she reached for the purse, expecting the dough to be gone.

"Everything there?" he asked. "A kid was about to make off with it when I stopped him."

She loosened the drawstrings and peeked inside. Everything was there—the wad of bills, the derringer, the flask. She blinked in confusion. "Yes, it's all here," she said in a small voice, still not daring to look at him.

He unbuttoned his jacket to reach for a gun and her breath stalled. Instead, he retrieved a wallet and flipped it open to a badge. "I'm Undercover Detective O'Neill."

A gasp of relief burst from her. She risked a glance at him, encountering mild, blue eyes and a helpful, white smile through a sappy mist that formed over her eyes. "Could I buy you a cup of coffee, Officer, for your trouble?"

"You can do more than that, miss. You're going to help me put a few dozen rumrunners behind bars."

Solution to the December "Dying Words"

WORD LIST

A. Wizardry
B. Moonshine
C. Autograph
D. Poker
E. Laugh off
F. Euphoric
G. Stood
H. Disinter
I. Estranged
J. Abbreviated
K. Desists
L. Moth-eaten
M. Exhaustive
N. Nutrition
O. Distort
P. Overseer
Q. Tasted
R. Echo chamber
S. Lawn mower
T. Locomotor
U. Territories
V. Aftereffect
W. Lackluster
X. Emphasized
Y. Shirked

QUOTATION

Author—W(illiam) MAPLES
Work—DEAD MEN DO TELL TALES (Doubleday—Copyright © 1994 by William R. Maples)

"We forensic anthropologists owe a dark debt to murderers . . . It is a . . . fact that . . . the most dazzling pieces of detective work in our profession have come about as a . . . a result of some extraordinarily depraved murder. The darker the crime, the brighter shines the solution."

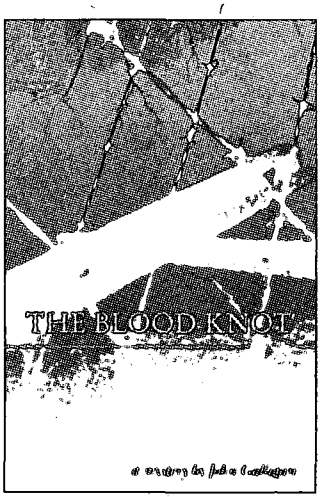
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Booked & Printed

ROBERT C. HAHN

While the large commercial publishers continue their pursuit of bestselling blockbusters, small presses—independent, non-profit, and university—are playing an ever larger role in discovering new writers and supporting the careers of mid-list authors. Though not large, Bleak House Books, Wordslinger Press, and Poisoned Pen Press are part of the expanding and diverse mystery publishing landscape.

Bleak House has recently published the second fly-fishing mystery by John Galligan, THE BLOOD KNOT ($23.95). The story takes place in an isolated rural area of Wisconsin and is infused with the grit and desperation normally associated with urban, noir novels. Ned Oglivie, known to his friends as Dog, a nickname derived from his full name, thusly neD OGlivie, is a tortured soul on the run from himself and seeking escape, if not oblivion, on a three-year fishing trip featuring minimal contact with other humans.



Dog's adventure begins with an encounter with a territorial beaver while wading upstream in pursuit of a hooked trout. A short while later it becomes even more surreal when he encounters a ten-year-old boy firing shots into the partially submerged body of the painter known as the "Barn Lady."

The iconoclastic Dog is swept into the odd world of the Kussmaul clan with its own divisions and territorial claims and its odd relations with and among the area's surrounding Amish families. The dead woman, free-spirited Annie Adams, a k a the Barn Lady, had had her share of disputes with various Kussmaul males who resented her making money from the pictures she painted of their uniquely fitted barns—pictures she painted without their permission and money she kept to herself with-

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out a twinge of regret. Now she was dead and Dog had seen with his own eyes young Deuce Kussmaul firing at her body with his .22.

Galligan demonstrates many strengths in this novel which uses fly-fishing as metaphor and philosophy and as the fulcrum by which Dog and Deuce begin to connect in a strange sort of apprenticeship. In the Kussmaul clan, Galligan has created an unforgettable group of shiftless strivers, always just getting by and always looking for an edge, legal or not. And in Eve Kussmaul, Deuce's mother, he has created a wonderfully complex woman who balances a bewildering array of contradictions in utterly convincing fashion.

Dog's gradual shift from disinterested witness to involved investigator is artfully accomplished and the question of who killed the Barn Lady and why Deuce shot her should puzzle readers till the end. It's worth the effort to find a copy of *The Blood Knot* and make the acquaintance of Dog and the denizens of Avalanche, Wisconsin.

Randall Hicks transports readers to a totally different scene in THE BABY GAME (Wordslinger Press, $22.95). Hicks's breezy mystery debut introduces Toby Dillon, an adoption attorney who has seemingly stumbled his way into a lifestyle unusual for an attorney but which suits him perfectly.

Toby's family runs a prestigious San Diego law firm begun by his grandfather, but Toby isn't part of it. And Toby's degree isn't even from a recognized school, prestigious or not, but is derived instead from a form of apprenticeship. Toby has stumbled happily into a solitary practice specializing in adoption where he can help people without working too hard and still have time to help out at the tennis club in exchange for room and an office.

Toby's best childhood friends, Brogan Barlow and Rita MacGilroy, have become movie stars and husband and wife. When they turn to Toby to help them with an adoption, Toby's world is changed radically. The adoption begins to take odd and ominous turns, and all of them find themselves confronting frightening changes with a baby's life at stake.

Hicks is an adoption expert and an attorney, and he uses his expertise to great effect in fashioning a mystery that provides an intimate look at the convoluted laws and processes that make adoption a minefield of mistakes waiting to happen. And while Hicks is adroit at exploiting the comic possibilities of his characters, he doesn't sacrifice a serious plot to do it.

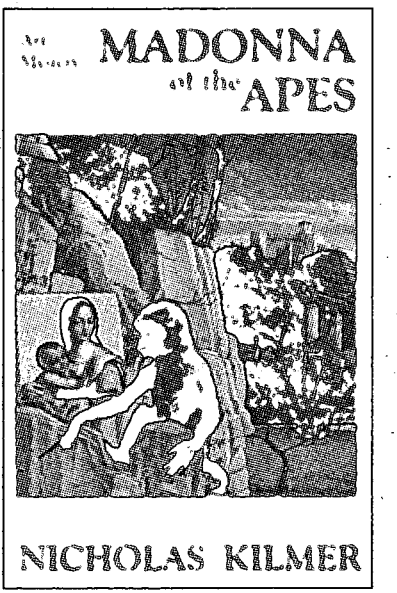
The result is extremely satisfying as Hicks's facile prose con-

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verts his technical expertise into a solidly entertaining mystery debut.

Nicholas Kilmer makes an impressive return to print with MADONNA OF THE APES (Poisoned Pen, $24.95). After a four-year hiatus, Fred Taylor and Clayton Reed, the odd couple who are featured in five previous art-themed mysteries make a welcome reappearance.

Fans of the series get a bonus since *Madonna of the Apes* is a prequel that details how Taylor, a man with a violent and secret past involving action in Southeast Asia, and Reed, a rich, elderly, and reclusive art collector, meet in Boston and form their unique partnership.



Kilmer, a teacher, former Dean of the Swain School of Design, and an art dealer, has ample credentials for the artistic matters that ground his mysteries as he uses the works by (or attributed to) John Singleton Copley *(Man With a Squirrel)* or James Abbott McNeill Whistler *(Harmony in Flesh and Black)*, and so forth. In each novel, the paintings or the dealings involving the art works are an integral part of the mystery that Taylor must unravel.

Madonna of the Apes is built around a work of art that just might be by DaVinci. At the same time that Taylor and Reed are taking each other's measure and trying to sort out the various scams that are being played out around a room full of artworks of questionable provenance, Kilmer is riffing with considerable skill on the life and art of Leonardo DaVinci. The scams range from crude to sophisticated to deadly, but they help forge the form the unique friendship between Taylor and Reed.

For those who have yet to make Kilmer's acquaintance, *Madonna of the Apes* is an ideal place to start since it is chronologically the first and it amply demonstrates the strengths of the series: good plotting, interesting characters, strong sense of place, and an intriguing background intelligible even to those with no knowledge of the art world.

Poisoned Pen has reprinted the five previous Fred Taylor mys-

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teries in trade paperback format each available for $14.95. The next most recent, *Lazarus Arise* is also available from Poisoned Pen as a hardcover for $24.95.

The chain bookstores aren't going to have huge displays of any of these books when you walk through their doors, but it's worth time and effort to seek out copies from specialty mystery bookstores or directly from the publishers.

ALL POINTS BULLETIN: Veteran author William Murray whose horse racing mysteries featuring Shifty Lou Anderson established him as a kind of "American Dick Francis" has returned to the track once more with DEAD HEAT (Eclipse Press, $24.95). Dead Heat is less a mystery than a racing novel, but it is filled with the same kind of colorful characters that populated his series fiction. Instead of Shifty Lou, the focus is on Sal "Bones" Righetti, a former enforcer who makes a living from betting the horses. One of his friends is trainer Jake Fontana, who's struggling to make a go of it while fighting against depression. Jill Aspen, a young woman fleeing a past and hoping to find a future as a jockey, earns a chance to shine while working for Jake. Murray has an excellent feel for the kinds of people who make up the racing crowd from stable hands to bettors to owners and trainers. • A.S.A.P. Publishing of Mission Viejo, California, is reissuing Margaret Coel's first mystery novel, THE EAGLE CATCHER, first published in 1995, in a 10-year anniversay edition and featuring an introduction by the author and illustrations by Phil Parks. Set among the Arapahos on Wind River Reservation in Wyoming, Coel's series spans eleven novels. The hardcover anniversary edition of The Eagle Catcher is priced at $45.00.



Note to Our Readers:

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A Christmas Pit

JOHN GREGORY BETANCOURT

When my doorbell rang, the sound jolted through me like an electric shock. I accidentally sloshed Jack Daniel's across my lap and began cursing all unexpected visitors.

Carefully, so I wouldn't spill another drop, I set the bottle on my night table, grabbed my walking stick, and swung my ruined legs over the side of the bed. Standing usually hurt, but I'd already drunk enough to feel a comfortable numbness instead.

The doorbell rang a second time, an annoying *brzzz* that set my teeth on edge.

"Stop that racket! I'm coming!" I yelled. I shrugged a robe over my underwear, knotting the belt halfheartedly, and limped out into my rather spartan family room.

By the time I turned the deadbolt and yanked open the front door, I half expected to find the hallway deserted. The brats upstairs enjoyed playing jokes like that—"bait the cripple," I called it.

Tonight, however, I found a soggy young man in an Atlanta Braves baseball cap and a cheap brown coat. Water pooled around him and the duffel bag he'd set down. Rain—that explained why my legs had been aching worse than usual.

"What do you want?" I demanded. "Don't you know what time it is?"

Involuntarily, he covered his mouth and nose and took a half step back. I had to reek like a distillery.

"Uh . . . six o'clock?" he said. His voice had a slight Southern twang.

"Oh." Only six o'clock? My sense of time was shot; I would have sworn it was past midnight. "I thought it was later than that. It gets dark early now."

"Are you . . . Peter Geller?" he asked hesitantly.

"Yes. You're here to see *me?*"

"Sir . . . David Hunt sent me."

I had gone to college with Davy. We had been in the same fraternity—Alpha Kappa Alpha. Since Davy came from old money, he got in because his family had always belonged to Alpha Kappa. I got in because I was smart: all the jocks and rich kids

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needed help to keep up their GPAs. Sometimes I had resented it, being used, but it got me into all the parties, and I still graduated at the top of our class.

My life had been a downward spiral after college. I had landed a plum job at an investment bank, but overwork and my always-racing mind led to a nervous breakdown. Six months later, an accident left me permanently crippled. I lost touch with everyone I'd ever known and began trying to drink myself to death, until Davy called me out of the blue to help him out when he was being blackmailed. That had been five months ago. We'd had dinner and drinks a dozen times since then, rekindling our old friendship. In fact, earlier this afternoon I had been wondering what to give Davy for Christmas. He already had everything money could buy.

"Are you some sort of social worker?" I asked warily.

"No, sir! I'm Bob Charles." At my puzzled look, he added, "Cree's brother."

"Got any ID?"

"Uh . . . sure." He dug around his coat's inside pocket. "Driver's license? Passport?"

"Either."

He handed me a military passport. Marine Corps issue, and the name under his picture read "PFC Robert E. Charles."

I nodded, my mental wheels starting to turn. Cree was the actress-slash-model Davy had been talking about marrying. Like Cher and Madonna, she only used one name.

"I guess you better come in," I said.

"Thanks." He scooped up his duffel bag and entered my apartment, looking around curiously. I didn't own much these days: a worn yellow sofa, a pair of white-and-yellow wingback chairs, a battered coffee table, and thanks to the miracle of Ikea, two tall wooden bookcases mostly devoted to bric-a-brac. No clocks, no calendar, no TV—nothing to remind me of the outside world. Nothing to stimulate my mind and set it racing again.

"How is Davy?" I asked.

"Good. He and Cree just left for Cancun."

"Oh? I thought he had business in New York tomorrow." At least, that's what he'd told me over the weekend.

Bob shrugged. "Cree's doing a photo shoot for *Sports Illustrated*—filling in at the last minute—so they decided to turn it into a vacation. They're flying out tonight. Probably already in the air."

He pulled off his coat, revealing an off-the-bargain-rack suit. I waved vaguely at the sofa.

"Sit down. Let me clean up. I wasn't expecting visitors. If you

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want a drink, help yourself—there's beer in the fridge."

Twenty minutes later, I'd washed my face, run a razor over a three-day growth of beard, combed my hair, and put on nearly clean slacks and a sweater. I almost felt human again, and I'd gotten rid of the worst of the whiskey smell.

Unfortunately, I had also begun to sober up, and with returning mental sharpness came all-too-familiar pains in both legs. Alcohol blunted my senses better than drugs; that's why I drank as much and as often as possible. I only stopped when I had to.

Finally I limped back out to the family room. Bob leaped up when he saw me, running one hand quickly across his nearly shaved head and pulling his suit jacket straight.

"Let me guess," I said, really studying him for the first time. His too-short hair and well-developed muscles screamed military. "You just got out of the service and decided to pay your sister a visit. She suggested Davy might be able to find you a job."

He gaped. "Did you talk to Cree?"

Slowly I settled into one of the wingback chairs, folded my hands across my belly, and stretched out both legs; they hurt less that way.

I said: "Why else would an ex-Marine come to Philadelphia, if not to see your sister and her fiancé? You're dressed up—I assume for a job interview—though I'd lose the baseball cap next time. But the real question," I said, warming to the subject, "is why Davy Hunt sent you here."

Bob frowned, brow furrowing. "He said he trusted your opinion. If you think I'm good enough, he'll take me on."

"In what capacity?"

"Bodyguard."

I raised my eyebrows slightly. "Davy needs a bodyguard?"

"My sister thinks so."

After their problem with blackmailers, I understood Cree's concern. Davy's net worth ran somewhere upwards of fifty million dollars—more than enough to make him a target for opportunists.

I opened my mouth, but before I could say anything, the doorbell rang again. From outside came faint childish giggles.

"You can start by taking care of those kids," I said to Bob. "Ask them not to bother me again."

"Sir!" Like a panther, he sprang to the door and threw it open. Ten-year-old boys scattered, screaming, as he gave chase. I heard Bob shouting something about "whooping hides" if they bothered me again, then several doors slammed shut.

When he returned, he was grinning. "I love kids," he said. "I don't

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think they'll bother you again, sir. At least, not for a few days."

"Thanks." Maybe bodyguards had their uses.

"Then you'll give me a try?"

I stared at him blankly. "I don't follow you."

"Sir, I'm supposed to be your bodyguard for the next few days. You can kick the tires. Try me out. Make sure I'm everything I ought to be to keep David safe."

"I don't *need* a bodyguard. I don't *want* a bodyguard. I leave my apartment once or twice a month at most!"

"David knew you'd say that." His brow furrowed. "He told me to tell you—beg your pardon, sir—to shut up and pitch in."

Just like Davy to be blunt with me. Maybe I did object too much. Maybe it did take a kick in the pants to get me moving. But did I really need a bodyguard?

It wasn't for me, though. It was for Davy. If he valued my opinion this much . . . well, I needed to get him a Christmas present anyway. This would be it, as I would let him know the next time I saw him!

"Very well." I motioned unhappily with one hand. I'd need rent money soon, anyway. "You can start bodyguarding in the morning. It's time I ran some errands, anyway."

Rent money meant a trip to Atlantic City and the casinos. Sometimes having a trick memory helped, like when I needed to know the number of face cards played from an eight-deck blackjack shoe.

"It'll be over sooner if I start tonight, sir."

" 'Over sooner'?" I chuckled. "Bob, you sound like you don't want to babysit a seedy drunken cripple!"

"Sir!" He looked alarmed. "I never said that!"

"Then you *do* want to babysit a seedy drunken cripple?"

"That's a fool's argument, sir." He shrugged with wry humor. "You know I can't win. I just thought you'd want me out by Christmas Day."

"I don't care. Start when you want. End when you want. It's all the same."

"Thank you, sir."

"Do you have a place to sleep?"

"Uh . . . not yet. I was hoping to bunk here."

It figured. Why did I suddenly feel like Oscar Madison from *The Odd Couple*, with an eager-beaver Felix about to move in?

"There's only one bed," I said, "and I'm usually passed out in it."

"The sofa is fine—after sleeping in a humvee for six months, pretty much anything will do. Just give me a blanket and I'll be out like a log."

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"There's one in the linen closet." I jerked my head toward the back of the apartment. "And an extra pillow on the top shelf."

Using my walking stick, I levered myself unsteadily to my feet. My legs ached again. Slowly I limped toward my bedroom, thoughts of Jack Daniel's and sweet oblivion dancing in my head.

Sometime later—it could have been hours, it could have been days—a loud humming filled my ears. It took a few minutes, but I finally realized the noise came from outside my skull. It shrilled on and on, incessant and very annoying.

When I couldn't stand it any longer, I rolled over and opened my eyes. Daylight leaked in around the blinds, casting a pallid gray light over my bedroom. Groaning, I got my feet to the floor and sat up.

The world swung and tilted. My head throbbed and my eyes burned. It had been a long while since I'd felt this sick. Usually when pain and nausea and headaches hit I can lie still and wait for them to pass. This humming grated on my nerves so much, though, that I rose and stumbled toward the door.

When I entered the kitchen, the noise grew louder. But what brought me up short was the brilliant, blinding light.

Every surface gleamed. Steel and chrome and glass shone and glistened. The burnt-out bulbs in the ceiling fixture had been replaced, the dishes in the sink had been washed, and my months-old collection of pizza boxes had disappeared from the counter. Underfoot, the white-with-gold-specks linoleum had a new glossy sheen. Even the trash can had a fresh white plastic liner.

The humming came from the family room. Bob Charles slowly moved into view, pulling a little canister vacuum around the floor, sucking up dirt and dust bunnies. He wore a clean white shirt and tie, but had on the same brown pants as yesterday.

"Good morning," he called cheerfully, switching off the vacuum. "Ready for breakfast?"

"What do you think you're doing?" I demanded. My voice came out as a croak.

"Tidying up."

"Don't you know the difference between a maid and a bodyguard? I was still in bed!"

"It's ten-thirty in the morning. You've been asleep for more than sixteen hours, Pit. Half the day is gone!"

"Not asleep. Unconscious. Delightfully, *painlessly* unconscious. And how do you know my nickname?"

"Nickname?"

"Pit. Short for Pit-bull. Got it in college."

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"Didn't you mention it yesterday?"

I shrugged. "Maybe."

But I hadn't. I could remember every word we had exchanged from the second I opened my front door to the second I'd gone to bed. Names, faces, facts, figures—I never forgot anything.

Maybe Davy had called me Pit, and Bob picked up on it subconsciously. I could only think of one other person besides Davy who still called me by my old nickname, and it seemed unlikely that Bob had ever met an organized crime figure like "Mr. Smith," as he called himself.

Bob was staring at my legs. I realized I hadn't put on a robe. Gray Jockey shorts didn't do much to hide the hideously scarred flesh running from my ankles to my hips.

Swallowing, Bob looked away. Pity—that was always the worst. It showed in his eyes.

"In case you're wondering," I said bitterly, "I got run over by a taxi." Everyone always wanted to know what had happened, even if they were too embarrassed to ask.

"David didn't say anything about that." Bob forced his gaze back to my face. "He did tell me to take you out for breakfast today, though—on him."

"I don't like going out. But maybe I'll make an exception this morning." Time to pay Davy back for sticking me with Cree's brother. I used to read *Gourmet* magazine; I knew some very expensive places to eat in Philadelphia.

An hour later we left my apartment. Bob wanted to drive downtown in his battered old VW Rabbit, but I refused. Folding my legs into that tiny box of a car would have been torture.

Instead, we ambled up the sidewalk toward the Frankford El, our breaths pluming in the cold December air. The sun played hide-and-seek through holes in the clouds, while an icy wind stirred leaves in the gutter. Far off, I heard an elevated train rumble past.

As we walked, Bob kept alert. Northwood is a small, blue-collar section of Philadelphia, and it had definitely seen better years. But it was safe enough by daylight, and in the years I'd lived here, I had never had a problem beyond kids playing "bait the cripple" with my doorbell.

"This neighborhood is a dump," Bob said. "You should find a better place to live."

"I don't like change."

"Those kids over there—" He nodded toward a boarded-up row house across the street where three teenagers in stocking caps

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watched us with predatory eyes. "They'd be happy to roll you for your cash."

"I think they're about to try it," I said. All three had gotten up and begun to cross the street toward us.

"Keep walking," Bob said. He turned to face the three. "I'll catch up in a minute."

"Do you need help?"

"I can take care of a couple of kids."

"Be careful." My mind started racing, taking in every detail. "The one on the left has a weapon in his pocket."

"How do you know?" Bob demanded.

"He keeps touching it through his pants. I don't think the others are armed."

"Get going."

"But—"

"Move!"

Spoken like a true bodyguard. I wasn't about to argue.

Turning, I limped quickly up the street. Motion caught my eye as I reached the corner. I half turned as a dark-skinned man in a gray silk suit seized my arm and propelled me toward the street.

"Relax, Mr. Geller," he said softly. "Mr. Smith wants to see you."

A white Lincoln Town Car roared up. Before it came to a stop, the back door popped open. My escort put his hand on the back of my head, pressing gently but firmly, and half guided, half pushed me into the lilac-scented back seat. Then he slid in next to me and slammed the door. We accelerated.

My abduction had taken less than five seconds. That had to be a record.

Twisting around, I gazed over my shoulder at the rapidly receding figure of my bodyguard. Those three kids skirted my bodyguard and continued up the block. When Bob turned to check on me, a priceless look of shock appeared on his face. I had vanished. He began to run toward the Frankford El.

Turning back, I made myself comfortable, wincing a little as I uncrimped my legs.

"Hello, Pit," said a smooth voice beside me.

"Mr. Smith." I nodded to him. With his salt-and-pepper hair swept back and his neatly manicured hands, he cut the perfect picture of a crime lord. As always, he wore an expensive Italian suit, blue this time, with a white carnation at the lapel. "If you wanted to talk to me," I said, "a simple invitation would have sufficed."

"Not with your new, ah, *friend* looking on." Smith smiled a predator's smile. Since our paths first crossed, he had developed quite an interest in me—due no doubt to my trick memory, which

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had dredged up his real name from a chance meeting many years before. Since then, I knew he had been researching my life—even going so far as bugging my phone.

"What brings you to my neighborhood?" I asked.

"I would like you to meet my associate, Mr. Jones."

"Jones?" I raised my eyebrows and turned to the dark-skinned man next to me. "You've got to be kidding." Of African descent, with a diamond stud earring in his left ear, Mr. Jones seemed as fashionably well groomed as Mr. Smith.

"Jones is my birth name," said Mr. Jones gravely. "Though I've been thinking of changing it to Tortelli to fit in better with the rest of the boys."

Mr. Smith gave a snort, then added, "Mr. Jones would not kid you about his name, Mr. Geller."

"Of course not." I sighed. Why did things like this always happen to me?

Then Smith lifted his left hand to my eye level. He held a miniature tape recorder. With his thumb, he pressed PLAY. Eleven beeps sounded—a phone being dialed. A moment later, I heard a woman answer:

"Hello?"

"Janice?" asked the voice of my bodyguard.

"Yeah."

"This is Bob. He went for it."

She laughed. *"How fast can you get him to sign off on you?"*

"A few days. God, he's depressing."

"Put a bullet in his head when you're done. Put him out of his misery. Can't have him talking to Hunt, anyway."

A chill went through me. Smith pressed the STOP button and returned the recorder to his pocket. It felt like I'd been struck in the stomach by a sledgehammer. Thank God I hadn't bothered to remove the bug in my telephone. Bob Charles had completely taken me in.

"Mr. Jones is in charge of your neighborhood," Smith said. "If you'd like your guest removed quietly, he will handle the extraction. As a personal favor to me, of course."

"Removed?" I said. "Extraction?"

"It is a specialty of mine." Mr. Jones smiled, showing beautiful white teeth.

"That won't be necessary," I said with a slight shudder. "I'd prefer to handle him myself."

Smith nodded. Mr. Jones passed me an ivory-colored business card with gold-embossed type. It said simply JONES & ASSOCIATES and gave a phone number with a local exchange.

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"If you need help, call me day or night," Jones said. "Any friend of Mr. Smith's is a friend of mine."

"Thank you." I pocketed his card. Not that I ever intended to call, but it would have been rude to refuse, and I thought it prudent to be very polite and very respectful to Mr. Jones.

Our Town Car glided to a stop in front of my apartment building. Mr. Jones got out, and awkwardly I did the same.

"Thank you," I said to Mr. Smith. "I owe you one."

"Yes, you do," he said.

Mr. Jones slipped back into the car, and they drove off together. I watched until they disappeared around the corner.

Suddenly, my life had gotten a lot more complicated.

Bob returned to my apartment half an hour later, looking cold and annoyed. I let him in and deadbolted the door. Then I looked him over. Hard to believe he planned to kill me. I had always considered myself a pretty good judge of character, and he had fooled me completely. Damn it, I had actually begun to like him, with his goofy gung-ho act.

"No black eyes," I said, "and no bullet wounds, punctures, scuffs, or scrapes. Those boys must not have been much trouble after all."

"They knew enough to steer clear of me."

"See why I don't leave my apartment?" I limped back toward the kitchen. "It's an unpleasant world. And it's much too tiring."

"What happened to you?" Bob demanded, following. "I couldn't find you anywhere!"

"Oh, a friend gave me a lift home. I ordered a pizza. I hope you like pepperoni. It's the only topping that goes well with scotch."

I sagged into a well-padded kitchen chair and took a slice from the take-out box. Sal's Pizza & Hoagies had dropped it off five minutes ago. I had already poured myself a large drink—mostly soda water, with just a splash of booze to give it the right smell, mostly for Bob's benefit. I couldn't appear to change my alcoholic behavior lest it tip him off that I knew too much.

"Pepperoni is fine." He got a beer from the fridge.

"Better stick with water," I told him, wagging a finger. "Bodyguards never drink on duty. Hazard of the trade."

Silently he put it back. I could tell it annoyed him, though. One point for me.

After lunch, I announced my plans to visit the Free Library of Philadelphia . . . not our local branch, which specialized more in popular fiction than world-class research materials, but the large one on Vine Street in Center City. A plan had begun to form in the

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back of my mind . . . layers of deception, baited with promises of fast and easy money.

"The library? Can't you use the Internet?" Bob asked. "Everything's online now."

"Not the material I'm looking for. And anyway, I'd still have to go to the library. I don't own a computer."

I didn't add that I blamed computers in part for the information overload that had led to my nervous breakdown.

On our second try, we reached the Frankford El without difficulty. I bought tokens; slowly we climbed up to the platform. Fortunately the train came quickly.

We sat in a nearly empty car, and I focused my attention on the floor, analyzing stains and scuff marks, trying not to look out the windows. Too much scenery, too much color and motion, tended to bring on anxiety attacks. I felt a rising sense of panic from Mr. Smith's warning. What would my fake bodyguard do if I suddenly curled into a fetal ball on the floor?

"If we get separated," Bob said suddenly, "we need a plan. A place to regroup."

I looked at his face. "My apartment?"

"That will do if we're in this area. I meant someplace downtown, while we're out today."

"There's a House of Coffee at 20th and Vine. That's half a block from the library."

He nodded. "Good."

I went back to studying the floor. We rode in silence until we reached Race Street, and there we got out.

Shoppers bustled on the sidewalk, carrying bags and boxes, hurrying on holiday errands. Street vendors hawked caps and scarves and bric-a-brac. Brakes squealed and horns blared from the street. A bus rumbled past, spewing exhaust and carbon dioxide.

I felt a crawling sensation all over. Nervous jitters, just nervous jitters. Too many people and too much noise.

"Are you all right?" Bob asked.

I blinked rapidly, trying to stay focused. "I feel overwhelmed—"

"Come on." He grabbed my arm and propelled me forward. With his help, I managed to cross the street, and we headed toward Vine. I kept my gaze fixed on the sidewalk.

"Clear the way!" Bob bellowed. "Sick man coming through!"

To my surprise, people actually moved for him—shoppers, businessmen, kids, even a pair of nuns—and we made rapid progress. Finally we passed through the double doors and into the sanctuary of the Free Library. A soothing silence washed over me. Better,

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better, so much better here. I closed my eyes, just breathing, and felt muscles starting to uncoil.

Bob said softly, "If you need to go home—"

"I'll be fine. The outside world is . . . difficult sometimes. I shouldn't go into crowds on holidays." I swallowed. "I'm feeling better now. Really."

The card catalog of my youth had been replaced by computer terminals. I eased into a hard wooden chair, stretched my legs out as far as I could, and began my search for books on New York City banks.

Bob, with the occasional bored yawn, kept watch over my shoulder. I began jotting down titles and Dewey Decimal System numbers. When I had ten books selected, Bob took the list.

"I'll find them," he said.

Within twenty minutes, he returned with eight of the ten volumes. Not a bad average—he made a fair research assistant.

The Manhattan Federal Trust sounded like a good choice. After suffering a series of financial losses in the late 1960's, it merged with Third Continental Loan, forming the Manhattan Third Federal Loan and Trust. It suffered a huge loss in 1973 when one of its armored cars had been hijacked. A half dozen name changes, mergers, and acquisitions later, I lost the trail in a 1991 savings and loan collapse. There didn't seem to be a surviving corporate entity.

I sat back. Yes, it would do nicely.

"Why do you care about this particular bank?" Bob asked suddenly.

"My father did some work there a long time ago," I said. "Can you find microfilm of back issues of the *New York Times*? I need to see July, 1973."

"The whole month?"

"Yes. And maybe part of August."

"You're the boss." Shrugging, he went to find a librarian.

Meanwhile, I returned to the computerized card catalog and began looking up volumes on the U.S. legal system—choosing more for titles than content. I had no intention of reading them if I could avoid it.

"You're in luck," Bob announced when he finally returned. "They have the *New York Times* going back over a hundred years on microfiche. A lady is setting up the viewer now. They have a private room you can use, too."

"Excellent!" I beamed, as I handed over my new list. "When I'm done, I'll need these books. Can you find them?"

"Sure."

When he glanced at the titles, his eyes widened. Volumes like

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Circumventing the American Tax System, Overseas Tax Havens, and *Criminal Statutes of Limitations: A State by State Guide* must have caught him by surprise.

"What are you planning?" he asked.

"Bodyguards aren't supposed to ask questions," I said with a wink. "I'm doing some research."

"If this is illegal, I want to know. I might be held responsible as an accomplice."

I laughed. "Since when is research a criminal act? I'm thinking of writing a book."

He frowned, clearly unsatisfied. But I offered no more explanations.

"Where do I go for the *Times?*" I asked.

"Over here." Turning, he led the way to a small room at the back of the library. An elderly woman had a machine set up for me, and while Bob went off to find my legal books, I began to skim newspaper headlines. Minutes ticked by. My bodyguard returned with a stack of hardbacks, then settled into the chair next to mine.

Finally I found what I wanted: an article dated July 19, 1973. Five men made off with an estimated half million dollars in cash by hijacking an armored truck on the Brooklyn Bridge in broad daylight. It had been a daring robbery, ably executed.

"Way to go, Dad!" I muttered just loud enough for Bob to hear. Never mind that I hadn't been born yet when the robbery took place—thanks to my accident, I looked thirty years older than my actual age.

I printed out the article, folded it up, and stuck it in my shirt pocket. Bait. The library charged thirty cents for the printout, and I paid the lady happily.

"That's all I needed from the *Times,*" I said as I limped out of the room. I found an empty reading table and pretended to study tax evasion and statutes of limitations for the next half hour. The volumes seemed interminable.

At last, just when I couldn't take it any more, my stomach growled, announcing dinner time. Another chance to gouge my assassin-bodyguard? I'd see how far I could run up his credit cards before letting him off the hook.

"I don't think Davy would mind springing for dinner instead of breakfast," I told Bob, closing *Offshore Flight: Where and How to Take Your Money.*

"Probably not," he said.

"There's a little seafood house around the corner called Charley's Red. Supposed to be pretty good too."

He perked up. "I could go for some surf and turf."

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"You won't be disappointed."

How could he be? It was a four-star restaurant with a wine list to die for.

Dinner was sublime. I ordered a bottle of Dom Perignon Rosé 1988 with my caviar-and-truffle-stuffed lobster á là Charley. As I kept telling Bob throughout the meal, "Don't worry, it's on Davy."

Bob could only grin and nod. Finally, after a delightful chocolate soufflé followed by a glass of aged port, I could eat no more. I leaned back and patted my too-full belly.

Bob received the check and blanched. Dinner for the two of us came to almost seven hundred and fifty dollars, I saw. Not including tip.

"They expect a twenty-five percent gratuity," I told him, feeling generous: service had been exceptional.

"I . . . I'm afraid I can't, sir." He gulped. "There's only a couple of hundred left on my credit card. David was going to reimburse me!"

"Oh." So much for running up Bob's credit cards. The possibility that my bodyguard might be broke had never occurred to me. "I'll handle it, then."

I pulled out my Amex. At least I knew Bob's finances now. Could I somehow use that to my advantage? I would have to think on it.

After I signed the credit card receipt, I found I could barely stand. So much for keeping my head clear. I had no choice but to agree to a taxi, which Bob said he would pay for, to make up for dinner. We rode in warmth and comfort back to my apartment.

There, I set my trap. I accidentally "forgot" to remove the robbery article when I tossed my shirt into the bathroom hamper. I carefully left the lid up and the article in plain sight. Neat freak that he was, I knew Bob would rush to close the hamper's lid, and when he did, he would spot the printout.

If he didn't conclude that my father had been in on the armored car heist, he was dumber than he looked. That, plus the research on offshore tax havens, painted me as a criminal at work . . . something he could try to turn to his advantage.

"Good night!" I said, heading to my bedroom with a fresh bottle of whiskey. I carried it mostly for show; I had no intention of clouding my mind further tonight. "Oh, I'll be up early—we have to go to Atlantic City tomorrow."

"Want me to drive?" he offered.

"No need. Casinos return your bus fare in quarters when you get there, plus they sometimes throw in coupons for lunch and other freebies." I had a drawer full of Golden Nugget T-shirts to prove it.

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As I lay in bed, thoughts racing, I mentally reviewed the recording Mr. Smith had played for me—and realized I had made a huge mistake.

Every button on a telephone keypad has a different sound. Since I remembered each tone on Mr. Smith's recording perfectly, it was a simple matter to match them up to numbers. Two seconds later, I had Janice's phone number. If I'd thought of it in time, I could have used a reverse directory at the library to look up her name and address.

Calling myself a drunken idiot, I picked up my phone's receiver, punched number 4 so the dial tone went away, and said in a low voice: "Please tell Mr. Smith I'm going to the Azteca Casino on the nine o'clock bus tomorrow morning. When I get there, I'd like my bodyguard's complimentary drink spiked—something that will tie him up in the bathroom for an hour or so. I'm going to win a million dollars at the blackjack tables. Don't worry, I'll give it back. If Mr. Smith is willing to help, I'll owe him another favor. If not—well, I'll manage on my own."

I hung up. Then I opened my night table's drawer and removed four pens from the neat row inside, along with an unused pocket notebook. In tiny, cribbed lettering, I began making lists of fictional transactions using several different colors of ink and alternating between sloppy and neat handwriting. First came dates, then names of various casinos and amounts I had won. At the bottom of each page, I noted the anonymous Swiss or Brazilian bank account into which the money had been wired. My fictional net worth climbed rapidly into the millions.

Of course, I included all the secret passcodes anyone might need to get the money out. I emphasized that part on the inside front cover: *Funds not accessible without account numbers and passcodes.* Bob would read those words first when he opened the notebook.

My legs and back ached fiercely the next morning. When I couldn't take the pain any more, I rose and stumbled into the bathroom. I gulped four aspirins with a glass of tepid tap water. God, I needed a real drink.

Someone had lowered the hamper's lid. I peeked inside. The printout in my shirt pocket had been removed, then put back, but not quite folded properly. Sloppy, sloppy work.

Returning to my room, chuckling to myself, I dressed in black Dockers and a navy blue shirt—more leftovers from my Wall Street days—then took a small suitcase from my closet and began to pack . . . underwear, socks, shirts, pants. Everything I'd need for

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an extended trip. I needed to convince Bob I planned on fleeing the country.

My bodyguard appeared in the doorway. "Going somewhere?"

"In case I decide to spend the night."

He nodded. "I'll bring my bag too."

An hour later we were on the bus. The drone of wheels on pavement, the murmur of little old ladies on their weekly gambling junket, the soft hiss of recycled air from the blowers overhead—I found it all curiously soothing. As I let myself relax, I began to open up and chat confidentially with Bob . . . part two of my plan.

"My father used to be involved with organized crime," I confessed in a low voice. Never mind that he had been a plumber. "He hijacked that armored car on the Brooklyn Bridge. The one I read about yesterday."

"What happened?" Bob asked. "Was he caught?"

"Not caught," I said. "Killed. His body turned up in the New Jersey wetlands near where Giants Stadium stands today. He had a bullet in his head, mob execution–style. I don't know what happened to the money, but I found out who did the hit a few years ago."

"Who?"

"Well . . . let's just say he's come a long way in the last thirty years. He runs the Azteca Casino. That's why I gamble there a lot. Every dollar I take away is a little piece of my revenge."

He looked puzzled. "I thought odds favored the house."

"For most games." I chuckled. "You'd never guess I'm worth nearly as much as Davy Hunt, would you?"

He gaped at me. "Then why are you stuck in that shabby little apartment? You should live like a king!"

I lowered my voice confidentially. "Because," I said, "I don't want to attract the attention of the IRS. If I started spending hundreds of thousands of dollars, they'd want to know where I got it."

"The tax havens," he said slowly. "That's why you were researching them!"

"Bingo."

He frowned. "Why are you telling *me?*"

"Because," I said grandly, "this is it. Today is my final day. I'm going to make one last big score and retire to Brazil while I wait for the statute of limitations on income tax evasion to pass. I want you to come with me as my bodyguard and assistant. I'll need help, and I think you're the man for the job."

He chewed his lip thoughtfully. This was a lot for him to consider. Would he go for it?

"If you're worried about salary," I added, "I'll pay you a lot better

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than Davy—starting with a twenty thousand dollar signing bonus as soon as our plane lands. That buys a lot in South America. When we come back, we'll both be set for life. What do you say?"

"It's a deal!" He offered his hand, and we shook on it.

Bait taken—hook, line, and sinker.

Our bus rolled into Atlantic City on schedule and stopped at Bally's. We filed off with the old people, collecting vouchers for twenty dollars in quarters, redeemable inside at the information booth. I shivered in the brisk wind while Bob collected our luggage. I should have worn a heavier coat.

"What next?" he asked, setting the bags down on the sideway.

"Go in and get our quarters, then we'll walk over to the Azteca."

He then ran inside with our vouchers. A few minutes later he came back carrying two rolls of quarters. Then, carrying our bags, we ambled toward the Azteca.

Shaped like a South American pyramid, the hotel-casino offered three hundred and thirty luxury hotel rooms, most with views of the Boardwalk and the Atlantic Ocean. The entire ground floor consisted of slot machines, gaming tables, bars, restaurants, shops, and two theaters for concerts and stage shows.

I surveyed the elbow-to-elbow holiday crowds. Too loud, too bright, too busy . . . your typical Atlantic City gambling hall. From experience, I knew I would need several stiff drinks to make it through the day. Adrenaline would keep me going for now, though.

"Where do we start?" Bob asked.

"Check our coats and bags," I said, "then take the quarters and play the slots slowly. Pretend you don't know me, but watch my back. Things will get crazy when I start winning big."

"How did you deal with it in the past?"

"I always kept my winnings under ten thousand per casino so they wouldn't catch on and blacklist me. Today, though, I'm going for broke. A million or more, all from the Azteca."

He whistled. "You can do that?"

"Trick brain, remember?" I tapped my forehead with an index finger. "Don't worry, I'll win. Just keep your eyes open and watch my back."

Without another word, I limped to the line of blackjack tables. I kept going until I found one where a cute Asian lady was shuffling fresh decks, and I took the chair farthest to the left. I'd see everyone else's cards before mine. With 416 cards in play, knowing how many of each denomination remained in the shoe gave me a decided advantage, especially as we got toward the end.

I removed two hundred dollars from my billfold—gambling seed

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money normally kept under my mattress—and bought a stack of chips. A man slid into the empty seat next to mine. I recognized Mr. Smith from the faint lilac scent.

"Good morning," I said without looking in his direction.

"That was quite a boast you made," he said. "A million dollars at blackjack?"

"I can do it, as you know."

He said, "That's why I'm here. I have to protect the casino's interests. You are a very dangerous man, Mr. Geller."

He set a tray of chips on the table before him—all bright pink and all stamped $100. He anted one. I risked $5. The three others at our table bet between $5 and $20.

The dealer began to draw cards from the shoe. A smattering of face cards and numbers for the others, a pair of jacks for Mr. Smith, a king and a four for me. Smith split his jacks, then hit for a twenty and a nineteen. I hit and drew an eight—busted. The house held at seventeen.

Nineteen cards gone. Four percent of the deck. A few more hands and the odds would tilt in my favor.

Mr. Smith collected two hundred dollars. The dealer swept away my five dollar chip. We repeated. Mr. Smith won another hundred, and I lost another five. Repeat. I had a push, Smith lost. Repeat, and we both won.

A blonde in a skimpy mock-Aztec costume and too much eye shadow approached. She had drinks on a tray.

"Compliments of the house," she said, setting them in the blackjack table's built-in cup holders. Ginger ale for Mr. Smith, watery scotch and soda for me.

"Thanks." I gulped mine in three swallows. "Bring me two more," I said before she disappeared.

Three more hands, sixty-seven cards burned. I increased my bet to twenty-five dollars. I split aces, then doubled down—easy wins. Three hands later, I increased my bets to fifty dollars. By that point, my initial investment had swelled to eight hundred dollars. Then twelve hundred. Then sixteen hundred.

Our dealer trashed the cards and began shuffling fresh decks together. My drinks arrived.

"You're good," said Mr. Smith, nodding.

"Yes," I agreed. I swallowed scotch and soda and felt myself relaxing, falling into the groove.

Suddenly Smith asked, "Would you like to play at a high-stakes table with the house's money? Management uses shills to keep the action hopping. There's nothing like a big spender on a winning streak to stir up the crowd."

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"What about my bodyguard?"

"He's having that special drink you ordered right now."

Casually, I glanced over at the slots. Bob was chatting with a different waitress in a mock-Aztec outfit. She held out a little plastic glass of what looked like cola, and he took it. As he sipped, he casually glanced in my direction, but showed no sign of recognizing me. Good boy.

"Ten minutes," said Mr. Smith, "and you'll be on your own."

Ten minutes. Eight to ten hands.

"I can wait that long."

It took almost fifteen minutes for Bob's drink to take effect. But when it hit, he hightailed it for the men's room at warp speed, leaving me alone.

I finished my hand—a $240 win—and tossed the dealer a twenty dollar chip. Mr. Smith gathered up his winnings. By my count, I now had $7,600 in front of me.

"Follow me," Smith said.

He threaded his way through the blackjack and craps and roulette tables to a small door marked PRIVATE: EMPLOYEES ONLY. Inside, the noise and bustle of the casino gave way to fluorescent lights, cheap blue carpeting, and stark white walls broken only by glass doors showing tiny offices.

At the office marked CASINO MANAGER, Smith went in. I followed.

"Harvey," he said to the pudgy-faced man at the desk, "this is Mr. Geller, the guest I told you about."

"Hiya, Mr. Geller." Harvey wiped a sweaty hand on his pants before offering it to me. We shook. He went on, "I have your paperwork ready."

"Paperwork?" I asked.

"Legal forms you have to sign."

"Lawyers run everything now," said Mr. Smith half apologetically. "In the old days, Harvey would have broken your legs if you tried to skip with the casino's money. Now he'll have you arrested."

"What a kidder!" Harvey said, laughing. "Can you imagine *me* breaking anyone's legs?"

Actually, I couldn't. But since Mr. Smith seemed serious, I gave a shrug and a smile.

Harvey held out a clipboard. I skimmed the one-page form—*I, Peter Geller, acknowledge that I am playing with the Azteca Casino Corporation's money,* yada yada yada. *I hereby warrant that all monies won or lost remain the sole and exclusive property of the Azteca Casino Corporation and will be surrendered before I leave the premises.*

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Harmless enough. I signed, pressing hard for three carbonless copies.

As soon as I finished, Harvey handed me the yellow copy from the bottom. Then he pushed a chip caddy loaded with gold chips stamped $1,000 across his desk. Ten stacks of ten chips each—one hundred thousand dollars. My hands began to tremble, and it wasn't from alcohol this time. I had never had this much money before . . . even if it wasn't mine to keep.

"What about my earlier winnings?" I asked.

"Give me your chips," said Harvey.

I did so. Harvey counted them quickly, took a lockbox from his drawer, opened it, and peeled seven crisp thousand dollar bills and six hundreds from a roll. Without comment, he passed them to me.

"Thanks." I tucked them into my billfold.

"Come, Pit," said Mr. Smith with a smile. "A fortune awaits!"

My bodyguard still hadn't returned. Uneasy and suddenly self-conscious, I settled down in the well-padded leather highboy seat at the left side of a high-stakes table in the center of the casino. Velvet ropes cordoned the players off from the general public, and floodlights bathed our seats in a warm yellow glow. Overhead, a blue neon sign blinked HIGH STAKES PLAYERS ONLY—$100,000 MINIMUM. I was the only player.

A young guy with his blond hair in a crew cut nodded to me, then began unsealing fresh packs of cards. As he shuffled, an elderly man with a string tie and cowboy hat settled into the highboy next to me. A girl brought him a tray with a quarter million dollars in chips. A few seconds later, an Arab—complete with robes and bodyguards—took the seat farthest right. I noted how the casino staff called him "Your Highness" and brought him drinks and bowls of green and red Christmas M&M's without being asked. He had to be a regular.

I definitely felt out of my league.

Cowboy-hat seemed to sense my uneasiness. He jabbed me in the ribs with an elbow and said, "First time here in the spotlight, huh, son?" He had a slight drawl. I noticed the heavy silver ring on his left index finger said A&M—probably Texas A&M University.

"Yes, sir," I said.

"Internet money?" he asked.

"Mob money."

Cowboy-hat got real quiet after that. I shifted uneasily in my chair. Then Smith returned and patted me on the shoulder.

"Good luck," he said.

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"Thanks. You're not playing?"

"I'll check back later. I have other duties."

"Of course."

Our dealer cleared his throat. "Ready, gentlemen?"

I threw out a thousand dollar chip. Time to get the ball rolling.

If only it had been my money. Never had I seen such a lucky streak.

I won my first six opening hands as I began to count cards. I won most of the middle hands where I knew enough to guess what might turn up. I won all the late hands, where the odds had shifted in my favor. Weird, wacky, wonderful Luck—where were you when I needed you, when that taxi ran me down?

My winning streak continued throughout the first hour. Shoe after shoe, I beat the house consistently. The dealer began paying me in ten thousand–dollar chips. I hadn't even known that denomination existed. My money grew . . . half a million, then nearly a million. Mr. Smith would never doubt me again.

And Smith had been right about the buzz a big winner created. Behind the velvet rope, a crowd gathered to cheer me on. I started to sweat; the whispers and bursts of applause pushed my senses toward overload. Those three watery scotch and sodas helped, but not nearly enough.

Suddenly I noticed Bob Charles at the front of the gawkers. He looked pale and shaky. He must have recovered from his sudden "stomach ailment."

"Mr. Smith says you need a drink," a voice said at my elbow. It was the same girl who had drugged Bob. She held out a tray. "Compliments of the house, sir."

"Thanks." Since everything in front of me belonged to the casino, I had no worries about being drugged.

It was another scotch and soda; I gulped it down. Strong this time, the way I liked.

"Bring me another?" I asked.

"Of course, sir." She vanished.

Tex leaned in close and said, "Better watch that stuff if you expect to keep winning. Gotta stay sharp, son!"

"Drink or die," I said unhappily. "I can't function sober."

He laughed. "Then maybe I should take up drinking, the way my luck's running!"

His stack of chips had been cut in half over the last two hours. Farther down the table, the prince barely held his own.

I bet fifty thousand—and got a blackjack. Cowboy-hat drew to a twelve and busted. Too many face cards still in play . . . with

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the dealer showing a five, I would have stayed.

My new drink came, and I downed it fast. The rising tide of voices began to grow muted; my hands stopped shaking. My world narrowed down to the cards.

But first, I reminded myself, I had to take care of Bob.

"I have to take a bathroom break," I said to the dealer. "May I leave my chips here?"

"Of course, sir."

"Don't worry, son," said Cowboy-hat. "I'll keep an eye on 'em for ya!"

"Thanks." I smiled wanly at him.

I rose, leaning heavily on my walking stick, and gave Bob a glance and a subtle follow-me jerk of my head. Then I limped to the men's room.

It was moderately busy inside. We stood side by side at the urinals, waiting until we were alone. Then I handed him my billfold with the $7,600 still inside.

"I have my million," I said. "There's a travel agency across the street. Buy two one-way tickets to Rio de Janeiro. I doubt if there's a direct flight from Atlantic City, but we should be able to make it with a couple of connections. Cut it as close as possible. When it's time to go, signal me. I'll cash out and we'll run for the plane. As fast as a cripple like me can run, anyway."

"Got it," he said.

I returned to the high-stakes table and found Mr. Smith had replaced Cowboy-hat. My chips had not been touched. Fortunately for me, most of the watchers had dispersed.

Our dealer began shuffling new decks of cards.

"Is everything going as planned?" Smith asked.

"I think so."

"I saw your friend leave. You should have let Mr. Jones remove him for you, you know."

"Human life has value," I said.

"You should watch out for yourself, not someone who's trying to kill you."

I shrugged. "Perhaps I made a mistake. But I like him, and I think he's basically a decent guy. He just took a wrong step somewhere."

"Are you sure you won't change your mind?"

"I'm more stubborn than sensible. Besides, it's almost Christmas. 'Tis the season of brotherly love, and all that mushy holiday stuff. I couldn't have his 'removal' on my conscience."

"What's next?" Smith asked.

"Bob is out buying tickets to Rio de Janeiro. He'll be on the

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afternoon plane. That's where you come in."

"I suppose he needs a lift to the airport?"

"I'm going to cash out when he returns. I'll give instructions at the cashier's booth for the winnings to be wired into a nonexistent Brazilian bank account. Then, on my way out the door, someone can grab me, force me into a car, and drive off with me. Bob will think I'm being kidnapped and take off for Brazil alone."

"Why would he?"

"Because," I said smugly, "he's going to have my little black notebook with all the passcodes and bank account numbers. He'll think he's struck it rich."

"Until he gets there and finds out there's no money."

"Right."

"Then he'll come back, hunt you down, and kill you for making a fool out of him."

"He'll stay there. I'm sure he'll call once he gets to Rio and finds out he's been duped. I'll simply tell him he'll be arrested for conspiracy to commit murder if he returns to the United States. I imagine you still have that recording."

"Of course."

"I'll borrow it and play it back for him. He won't dare return. End of problem!"

Smith shook his head. "You overly complicate things, Pit. Remove him and move on with your life."

"That's not an option."

"Your plan is ridiculous."

"But you'll help me," I said.

He shrugged. "I find it fairly amusing. But once it's done, I have a real job for you in Las Vegas. One for which you are uniquely qualified."

"As long as I don't have to break the law," I said, "I'll go. I always keep my word."

The dealer asked, "Ready, gentlemen?" He had finished stacking the cards in the shoe.

Smith excused himself. The prince and I both anted, and our game began anew.

By the time Bob returned, I had won another hundred and forty thousand. A new crowd gathered beyond the velvet ropes. Bob eased his way to the front and signaled me by tapping his wristwatch. Time to catch our plane.

"That's it for me," I said, rising. I tossed the dealer a thousand dollar chip. "Thanks for everything."

"Thank *you*, sir!" he said, beaming.

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I gathered my winnings onto a tray, then limped to the cashier's station. Mr. Smith sat comfortably ensconced behind the brass grill.

"How much did you win?" he asked in a low voice as I passed him my chips.

"One-point-two million," I whispered smugly, "plus change."

"It's a good thing you *were* playing with the house's money. How soon do you want to be abducted?"

"As we leave. We'll go through the doors onto Atlantic Avenue. Do you have a pen and paper?"

"Here." He slid them over to me.

I jotted down wiring instructions for the money and passed it back.

"Might as well go through the motions," I said. "May I have a receipt for the wire?"

Chuckling, he made one up. I tucked it into my little notebook, which I kept in hand as I limped off for the Atlantic Avenue doors. There Bob Charles waited impatiently, pretending to study a marquee. I paused beside him. From the corner of my eye, I saw men in black suits starting to converge on us.

"I already wired the money to my Brazilian account from the courtesy counter. But I don't think they're going to let me leave here safely." Casually, I dropped the notebook. "Cover that with your foot. Pick it up when I'm out the door—they can't find it on me. It has the passcodes for my anonymous bank accounts. If I can, I'll catch up at the airport."

Without bothering to retrieve my coat or bag from the checkroom, I headed for the door. The bellman opened it for me, and shivering at the sudden cold, I stepped outside.

Smith's men followed on my heels—goons built like refrigerators. I had seen both of them before at Smith's illegal casino outside of Philadelphia.

A white Town Car sat idling in front, and they grabbed my elbows and hustled me inside. I didn't struggle.

As I twisted around, we accelerated into traffic. I glimpsed Bob running out the front door. He stood there, staring after me, a look of anger on his face.

He cared what happened to me. I saw it, and in that moment I knew I had made the right decision. Better to handle him myself than let Smith and Jones do it. He was basically a decent guy.

"Thanks, fellows," I said to the goons.

Mr. Smith sat in the front passenger seat. He opened a small window in the bulletproof partition separating our seats.

"Where next?" he asked. "The airport?"

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"Take a ten minute drive, then back to the casino. I have to pick up my coat and bag. Then I'll catch the bus home."

"You heard the man," Smith said to our chauffeur.

"Yes, sir!" he said.

The goons and I settled back.

We didn't even make it five blocks—police cars with blinking lights cut us off, front and back. Our driver slammed on the brakes; we fishtailed, then came to a screeching halt.

As uniformed officers leaped from their cars with drawn weapons, Smith's goons reached for their guns.

"Don't do that," I said in a low voice. "This has to be a mistake."

A bullhorn blared: "Get out of the car with your hands up!"

"I'm not happy, Pit," said Mr. Smith. He got out of the car and raised his hands. The chauffeur and goons did the same.

Slowly, painfully, I followed.

"You are in big trouble," Smith told the policemen who advanced. "Do you know who I am?"

None replied. They forced his hands onto the roof of his Town Car and began frisking him. Another officer began reading us all our Miranda rights.

That's when I spotted Bob Charles sitting in one of the patrol cars. He must have gone running to the cops instead of taking off for Brazil with my money. I nodded to him, and he grinned back.

"That's him—that's Peter Geller!" he said, climbing out and pointing at me. "They were kidnapping him!"

A police lieutenant took my elbow and drew me to one side. "Mr. Charles flagged down a patrol car," he said, "and reported your abduction. He said you won big at the casino and they weren't going to let you keep it. Is that true?"

"No," I said emphatically. I gestured at the Town Car and Mr. Smith. "This is some kind of misunderstanding. I work for the casino. These men are all friends of mine. We were taking an early supper."

The lieutenant frowned. "What about the money he said you won? More than a million dollars, wasn't it?"

"Nonsense. I was playing with the casino's money. Here—see for yourself!"

I pulled out the yellow copy of the form I'd signed. The lieutenant scanned it, snorted, then said to the other cops:

"Let them go. We've made a mistake."

"Thank you," said Mr. Smith. He straightened his tie and jacket.

The lieutenant stalked back to Bob, and they exchanged heated words. Bob read the yellow form, then stared at me in disbelief.

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When the lieutenant made Bob get out and lean up against the hood of the police car, I watched with amusement.

Of course, the officer turned up two wallets—one of them mine—plus the notebook of bank account numbers and plane tickets. He studied them, then stalked back to me.

"Is this yours?" He held out my wallet.

"Yes. Bob was holding onto it for me."

He frowned. "And two tickets to Rio?"

"Also mine."

"Notebook?"

"Yep. Mine."

His eyes narrowed. He knew something odd had gone down, but for the life of him he couldn't figure it out.

"I think you all had better come with me to the station," he said.

I shrugged. "As you wish." To Mr. Smith, I said, "Perhaps you can recommend a good lawyer?"

"He'll meet us there," Smith said grumpily, reaching for his cell phone.

I rode in the back of the police car with Bob. The cops hadn't bothered to handcuff either one of us. Mr. Smith and his goons were following in their Town Car.

"Are you insane?" Bob demanded. "I just saved your life! Why are you doing this to me?"

"Maybe I'm a little bit cranky, but I'm hardly insane." I chuckled. "You asked me to kick your tires, Bob. Congrats. You passed the test."

His breath caught in his throat. "A . . . test. This whole thing . . ."

"That's right. And I can almost recommend you to Davy Hunt."

"Almost?"

"There's one matter you still have to take care of."

He looked puzzled. "I don't understand . . ."

"Janice."

He paled. "How—how do you know—"

"Trick brain, remember?" I grinned. "Tell the police how Janice tried to set up Davy using the two of us, and I'll get you cleared of all charges by morning."

Once Bob started talking to the police, he had quite a story to tell. When he got out of the Marines, an old girlfriend contacted him, got him to come to Philadelphia, and told him she worked as the private secretary for a billionaire sleazebag named David Chatham Hunt.

A year ago, Janice had a romantic fling with her boss. Presents

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were given, promises were made . . . Apparently, she expected the relationship to go farther than Davy did. When he broke things off and started dating a supermodel named Cree, she took it very hard.

Janice planned her revenge with meticulous care. As his private secretary, she knew Davy's position on the Board of Directors at Hunt Industries was provisional. Any hint of a scandal and he'd get the boot. Davy couldn't allow that to happen.

And that's where Bob came in. Janice knew about my friendship with Davy, and she thought my personal recommendation would get Bob hired as bodyguard, cutting through a lot of red tape. Apparently she believed she could lure Davy into a final romantic tryst, one where Bob would be present to take blackmail photos.

It could have worked. Davy might well have fallen into her trap. I could easily envision my old friend having one last fling with his secretary, just to get her off his back.

Once Janice was arrested, she collapsed into hysterics at the police station, confessed everything, and ultimately pleaded guilty to conspiracy charges. Her case would never go to trial, saving Davy a lot of embarrassment.

Thanks to Mr. Smith's lawyer, Bob Charles ended up with probation and stern warnings from a judge. He never spent a single night in jail. Best of all, on my recommendation, Davy hired him as his personal bodyguard. I thought they would go well together. Bob had certainly proved himself to my satisfaction.

"And that's the whole story," I said to Davy and Cree over Christmas dinner. Cree had cooked it herself—a beautiful roast goose with cranberry sauce, mashed sweet potatoes, green bean casserole, and a delightful selection of home-baked pies.

"Incredible," Davy said, shaking his head. "You know what the worst part of this whole mess is?"

"What?" I asked.

"Janice was the best secretary I ever had."

Cree punched him on the arm—hard.

"But my new secretary seems just as good," he added quickly.

"Better," said Cree. She turned to me. "I picked him out myself. No more office romances, right, Davy?"

"Right!" he agreed. But he seemed a little wistful.

I chuckled. "It took a long time and cost a small fortune, but what do you think of my present?" I asked.

"Present?" Davy scratched his head and looked at Cree, who shrugged. "Did I miss something?"

I raised my wineglass in salute. "For the man who has everything—a new secretary and a new bodyguard. Merry Christmas, Davy!"

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A Matter of Taste

PETER KING

"Shady tactics, scams and scandals, substitutions, fakes and frauds, blatant copies—you've run into all of these, Nic."

Nic Landers nodded and waited for Roger Sheraton to continue. The president of Sheraton, Pemberton and Delano had silvery temples, black hair, and an aristocratic face that stemmed from one of San Francisco's oldest families.

He had bought the foundering wine dealership fifteen years ago, added his name to it, and turned the operation around swiftly. They catered only to more affluent clients and their exclusivity put them in great demand.

"These blots on the good name of the California wine industry are increasing alarmingly," Roger continued. "It's the same in other states and other wine-producing countries, so it must be a symptom of the times."

"The get-rich-quick urge," said Nic.

"Yes, that—and as the president of Sotheby's wine department said recently, 'Anyone can easily produce great wines if they are prepared to break the law.' Well," Roger said, "we have to do something about it. Now, we can't afford a full-time investigator, so I'd like you to take a crack at the problem. You can fit that into your schedule, can't you?"

Roger was irresistible when it came to charming someone into doing something that sounded out of the question, and this occasion was no different. Ten minutes later, he smiled his satisfaction smile.

"Right, that's settled then—now initially I want to start you off on an easy one. I'm not aware of any criminal intent in this matter, it seems to be just a puzzle—"

"You've got me hooked already," said Nic. Six feet, brown hair, and brown eyes that women found attractive, he had an athletic step—honed by regular sessions on the squash court.

"There's a Cedric Cranston staying at the Huntington Hotel,"

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Roger said. "He wants 'a wine expert,' he says, to accompany him to an auction."

"I didn't know there were any auctions pending," protested Nic.

"It's private—don't worry, it must be legitimate, Farringdon's has been retained to run it."

"They're among the best," Nic agreed. "What does this Cranston fellow want?"

"He won't say. He just says he will explain it all to the expert we supply."

"How did he get onto us?"

"Called the Napa Valley Wine Board."

Nic shrugged. "All credentials check out so far."

Roger drummed fingers on his desk. "This Cranston said this was a highly confidential matter—that's what has put me on the alert. Couldn't get another word out of him—oh, except he has no hesitation in paying whatever fee we stipulate."

"A big spender, eh?"

"Yes . . . maybe that made me just a tad suspicious too. We get few clients today who don't haggle over the fee."

"Do we know anything about this Cranston?"

"Clean as a whistle, Eve assures me," said Roger.

Eve Wheeler handled her hi-tech equipment like an expert lion tamer handled her animals. Checking on the credentials of clients was part of her everyday activities. After all, when a client wanted to have Sheraton, Pemberton and Delano buy a hundred thousand dollars worth of wine for them, the firm needed to know a lot more than could be revealed by leafing through bank statements and credit reports.

"Too clean?" asked Nic.

Roger knew what Nic meant. Those with something to hide often kept their record too squeaky clean. Roger shook his head. "I don't think so. My guess would be he's straight." He reached for the phone. "Let's set it up . . ."

The Huntington Hotel at Taylor and Mason on North Beach is small and luxurious. The service is friendly and attentive and the better rooms four hundred dollars a night and up so Nic supposed this fellow Cranston was no piker.

The desk called Cranston's room and said he would be right down. Nic was glancing through a few listings of professional interest on the American Exchange in the *Wall Street Journal* in the lobby when a voice called his name.

The man approaching was possibly his age or maybe a handful

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of years younger. He was slightly built and had sparse, sandy hair and large-lensed glasses with clear plastic rims. He wore a lime green linen Polo shirt and light beige slacks with white canvas loafers. He had an ingenuous air, as if he didn't come to the big city very often.

The two confirmed one another's identity. Cedric Cranston had a shy smile and gave the impression of a friendly, easygoing nature. His voice was light and he had a Midwestern accent. He waved to an arrangement of leather armchairs around a knurled wood table. "Shall we sit? My room's very comfortable, but it's more spacious down here."

They did so and sat at right angles to each other. "We have well over an hour—plenty of time to get to the auction," Cranston said.

"The auction?" Nic questioned.

He looked concerned. "Yes, surely Mr. Sheraton explained the purpose of my request to your company? I want someone—"

"I understand that," Nic said, "but I didn't realize that the auction was today. I thought we were merely going to talk about what you have in mind, devise a bidding strategy, and agree on—"

"Ah!" he said, looking alarmed. "Perhaps I didn't explain myself clearly to Mr. Sheraton. No, the auction is today at eleven A.M." He examined Nic's face anxiously. "It's really very simple. I can tell you in a few minutes what I want. We will take a taxi and be at the auction rooms in half an hour. Plenty of time, you see." A thought struck him. "Do you have a lot of preparing to do? I'm sorry, I know nothing about auctions and I didn't realize—"

"No, no, it's all right. I can handle it this way."

Nic felt protective toward him—he had a helplessness about him and so obviously had an acute sensitivity about being the neophyte on the verge of getting tossed into the threatening arena of the auction.

"Are you sure?" He pushed his glasses farther up on his nose. "The auction is today though, and it's very important to me to—"

"It's okay, really. Do you have a catalog?"

"Yes, right here." Cedric Cranston pulled one from his pocket and handed it to Nic.

"First," Nic said, "can you tell me what you have in mind? What are you looking for? Some particular lot, one of the better buys . . . ?"

"I want to buy one wine."

"One lot?"

"No, I—"

"One case?"

"No, one bottle."

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"One bottle," Nic repeated weakly. "Well, okay, any bottle in particular?"

"Oh yes, very definitely. I want a bottle of Leoville-Barton Bordeaux, 1959."

Nic felt a slight quickening of the pulse. The day might be an interesting one after all. On its way to the Atlantic Ocean, the Gironde River runs through France, past vineyards that produce excellent red wines. Rich in history, this region has been inspiring minds and enlivening bodies with its products for more than a thousand years.

At the northern end of this string of vineyards are those clustered around the village of St. Julien, where one of the outstanding chateaux is that of Leoville-Barton. The wines are world renowned, and their silkiness of body, combined with an unusually attractive bouquet, has put them in great demand. As Nic's mind rapidly recalled this information, an obvious question arose.

"Mind telling me why that particular wine?"

Cedric Cranston smiled apologetically. "I don't suppose it's the kind of reason that would make much sense to anybody else." His expression suggested that he considered that explanation sufficient to answer Nic's question.

Nic felt only a frustration that the response told him nothing. He was about to press the point, but instead he asked, "You've looked at the catalog, have you?"

"Yes, certainly." He nodded vigorously.

"The Leoville is one of the items to be auctioned, I take it?"

"Of course." He sounded aggrieved. "I wouldn't bring you here for nothing. No, no," he went on, "one bottle of the wine is in the catalog and I want to buy it."

"I haven't had a chance to check what the listing on a Leoville of that vintage is currently," Nic said, "but I would guess it will be close to two thousand dollars."

Nic waited for him to throw up his hands in horror. Instead, Cranston said placidly, "That would be good if I could get it for that price."

"Do you have a limit on the bidding?"

"No limit," he said so promptly that it was clear he had thought about this at length.

"If you don't have a limit, why do you need me?" Nic asked. The client was paying the fee and it was really no concern of Nic's, but he was consumed with curiosity. Cedric Cranston didn't appear to take offense in any way. Behind the big lenses, his eyes seemed to grow bigger and rounder.

"I don't know the ropes. All that tapping the side of the nose,

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holding a hand against the cheek, pulling an earlobe—I don't know all those signals to the auctioneer or what they mean."

"Not likely to be any of that here," Nic said. "You've seen too many movies about auctioning paintings worth twenty million or more."

"What about those paddles they wave?"

"The bidders here won't use paddles; they'll use the catalog. A discreet wave of it will mean moving up to the next price level. You may see only a flicker of the program if someone wants to maintain a low profile."

"I don't know those levels either." He was determined to find reasons to have Nic bid for him, that was obvious. Nic still wondered why.

"Maybe it will be a hundred dollars a jump, sometimes it's fifty," Nic told him, "for a price around this mark."

Cranston nodded eagerly.

"Do you have any reason to believe that someone will be bidding against you?" Nic asked. "Someone who will push the price up?"

"No," he said, then he added, "Well, not necessarily." He didn't attempt to elaborate and didn't appear to be about to do so.

Oh Roger, Nic thought, what have you dropped me into here?

"I really want that wine," Cranston said suddenly. He had raised his voice and, realizing it, glanced around nervously in case he had been overheard. No one was anywhere near them. The desk was on the other side of the lobby, and the young man and the young woman behind it were well out of earshot.

"Listen," he said, in a lower tone, "the difference between what you can get it for and, say, three thousand dollars—I'm willing to give you half of it as a bonus."

Nic was not mercenary, he often told himself, but that was a tempting offer. On the other hand, Cedric Cranston had no way of knowing it, but dangling a bonus of that amount didn't make any difference to the effort Nic would make to buy it for him. He was the client and Nic would do his utmost to satisfy him. During his career to date, brief as it was, there had been numerous temptations to make money from wines illegally. He had resisted all of them. He didn't consider it as being particularly honorable; his parents had instilled an honesty and integrity into his upbringing and he saw that as the way to live. Money was nice to have, but his tastes were not extreme, and a life of luxury obtained through bribery and corruption did not appeal to him.

Still, this whole affair was so extraordinary that he wondered what forces were being exerted that he knew nothing about. There was a certain fascination in solving the puzzle and he was set on doing just that.

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Anyway, what did he have to lose? Nothing. He was here to do a job and do it to the best of his ability. This was certainly an assignment that was intriguing in the extreme. He didn't understand it and he wanted to. He still had plenty to learn in the wine business and undeniable factors seemed to be at work here that he had never encountered before.

They took a taxi from the hotel after another ten minutes of discussion that brought no further elucidation.

Nic had the opportunity to glance through the catalog as the taxi wove its way through the city traffic. Some prestigious and valuable wines were on auction and the proportion of single bottles was higher than usual. Most auctions sell by the case, which brings more total revenue.

Cedric Cranston had handed the taxi driver a piece of paper with an address on it when they left the Huntington Hotel, so Nic didn't know exactly where they were going, but there was enough sun that he knew they were heading south into San Mateo. They pulled clear of the traffic and were able to make better time.

"We'll be turning off and going toward Half Moon Bay," Cedric said eventually. "Graystone Manor is just off Highway 1 and has a great view of the Pacific Ocean."

"You've been there before? This Graystone Manor?"

"Oh yes."

"So Graystone Manor is where the auction is being held?"

"That's right. It's a beautiful building. You'll love it."

What he would really love, Nic thought, is to know what this is all about. He was trying to formulate another question or two that might bring some elucidation when the taxi swung off Highway 1. They had gone only a few hundred yards along a narrow but well-kept street before they were driving past a long stone wall. Cedric leaned forward to the driver, who was holding up the sheet of paper with the instructions on it. They exchanged a brief question and answer, then the driver slowed and they stopped at an impressive pair of wrought-iron gates set in massive stone pillars. Silently, they swung open.

They drove on a road that wound upward between expanses of dazzling green lawn with stands of leafy oaks.

They passed a clearing with a large brick building that looked old but had modern overhead shutters. Nic craned his neck to see it better.

"My uncle's hobby," Cedric said. "He made his money in the scrap business and even after he retired, he couldn't give it up altogether."

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One shutter was open and Nic could see neat stacks of paper and beverage cans and bottles inside the warehouse. "He was very environmentally conscious too," Cedric explained. "Really enthusiastic about developing better recycling methods."

Nic was wondering if they had enough gas when they emerged onto a straight stretch of road that revealed a magnificent towered and turreted mansion of gray stone.

Cedric was regarding it without emotion. "You can see why they call it Graystone Manor," he said as he paid the driver.

A man in a smart dark blue uniform with red cuffs and collar and brass buttons was at the wide stone steps that led up to two enormous oak doors. He must have memorized names, for as soon as Cedric gave his, the man lifted the wrought-iron arm and opened the one door to let them in. Another servant, similarly attired, stood in the center of a large hall with would-be baronial trappings—a suit of armor, shields and banners, arrays of edged weapons and tapestries on the walls. Two large doors led into what was obviously the ballroom, now converted into an auction hall. A magnificent chandelier threw off crystal flashes while bulbous orange lamps on the walls reflected from the polished wood panels.

A large podium was front and center, with a smaller one at the side of it. At least a hundred chairs were arrayed in rows and half of them were filled already. Most were men in business suits. Nic even recognized a few faces. A table at the back had two young women with phones and laptop computers set up. Nic reviewed the catalog. The Leoville-Barton Bordeaux 1959 was Lot 449, just below the halfway mark in the program. The auctioneer came on to the front podium and Nic recognized him as one of Farringdon's most experienced auctioneers. Then a young woman seated herself at the smaller podium next to it ready to note the bids. By now, more than two thirds of the seats were filled.

It was a good turnout, but then San Francisco is a wine-drinking and a wine-buying town. California, New York, and Illinois are the only states in the Union that permit wine auctions, and California leads by a wide margin in volume of business transacted this way.

The auctioneer opened the bidding on a case of Domaine Roumier Clos 1978. It is a rich and long-lived wine from a renowned producer in a vintage not commonly seen, he commented. No particular enthusiasm manifested itself despite the recommendation, and bidding was low in the estimated range of nine hundred to twelve hundred dollars. It crept past the one thousand mark, but even laudatory comments by the auctioneer did not bring it higher and it went for eleven hundred dollars.

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Cedric followed the action—if it could be called that—with glistening eyes and parted lips. He whispered an occasional question and Nic answered. They had chosen seats near one end of a row toward the back so no one was in the surrounding seats. Farther along the row sat an elderly man with an old-fashioned wing collar. His finger was following his well-thumbed copy of Broadbent's *New Great Vintage Wine Book*, a valued reference and a reliable guide.

A 1958 Bouchard Pere et Fils Beaune went next. Bidding was brief and low and it sold for four hundred dollars. A favorite drinking wine of Nic's came next—a case of Deinhard Bernkasteler Doktor Auslese 1976. It went past its reserve and a determined man in a summer suit sitting near the front bought it for five hundred and fifty.

So far, Nic noted, several of the wines were eminently drinkable and some went as collector items. He commented on this to Cedric, who nodded without surprise. Some excellent clarets followed, a 1929 Latour and a 1945 Margaux among them. The phones were busy and several bids came in from last-minute absentees. Other bids had come in by fax, and the auctioneer kept referring to them. Finally, it came to their turn and Nic heard Cedric take a deep breath.

"And now," said the auctioneer, "we come to Lot 449, a Leoville-Barton Bordeaux 1959. This wine is one of the finest in the commune, and it has the reputation of being one of the best clarets offered. It is always in great demand and I know . . ." He went on with his buildup then—and Nic could hear Cedric holding his breath—lifted his gavel.

A write-in bid started off at eight hundred—clearly from an optimist. The price went speedily up to a thousand, twelve hundred, then fifty at a time until it reached fifteen hundred dollars.

Cedric was getting nervous. "When are you going to jump in?" he hissed. Nic waved him down—using his other hand, not the one with the program. At seventeen hundred, the pace slowed and it was then that Nic flicked the program to offer seventeen fifty. Cedric, watching him anxiously, nodded relieved approval. A couple of phone bidders backed out, a merchant Nic knew from Seattle shook his head, which left only a bald-headed man near the front as a competitive bidder.

He went to eighteen hundred dollars and Nic promptly raised it to eighteen fifty, then it was his turn to hold his breath. The auctioneer gave the bald man the allotted time, doubled it without response. Then the gavel came down.

"Cedric," Nic said, "you've just bought a bottle of wine."

They were back in the Huntington Hotel by one thirty. In Cedric's room, Nic carefully placed the wooden case containing

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their trophy onto a table, opened the lid, and removed the bottle. They both looked at it. Nic had seen dozens of valuable bottles of wine but never failed to get a thrill.

Cedric sat for some moments, regarding it as reverently as if it were the Holy Chalice used at the Last Supper. At last, he got up and went to a side table, returning with two wine glasses and a corkscrew. He cut the foil around the neck of the bottle. His cutting was a little ragged; it was clearly not something he did often. Nic watched in horrified amazement.

Cedric inserted the corkscrew and began turning.

"What are you doing?" Nic asked, but Cedric ignored the question.

He extracted the cork, being as careful as his evident lack of practice would allow, and laid it on the table. He sniffed the bottle, nodded, and poured two glasses of wine. It was rich, ruby red, pulsing with promise.

He handed a glass to Nic. "Cheers," he said, taking a large swallow.

"Do you realize what you've just done?" Nic prided himself on his self-control, but this was beyond the limit of duty for a wine merchant, and his voice was not only shaky but almost a squeak.

"Cheers," Cedric said again, taking another big swallow.

Nic sighed. He sniffed the wine then sniffed again. He twirled the glass to see how the wine would cling to the sides. He took a tiny sip, frowned, swirled, and took another. When he put it down, Cedric promptly poured more wine into both glasses. Nic watched as Cedric emptied his glass in one big draught and poured again.

"Might as well finish it," he said happily.

"Would you mind telling me something—" Nic began hoarsely.

"Certainly," Cedric said, "but first, let's take care of this." He put the glass down and took a checkbook and a pen from his pocket. "Three thousand minus eighteen fifty is eleven fifty. Half of that—" He scribbled, tore out the check, and put it on the table. "—is five seventy five. The bonus I promised. Thank you."

Cedric Cranston drank again and just to keep him company, Nic took another sip.

"What do you think of it?" Cedric asked with a grin.

Nic sipped again. "Well . . ."

"Go ahead. Tell me."

Nic considered.

"You could buy just as good a wine as this at Safeway for ten dollars," Nic said. His voice was hollow.

"Maybe somebody did," Cedric said.

"What do you mean by that?" Nic asked, going quickly from puzzled to irritated.

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Cedric sat looking at the bottle he had bought, seemingly wrapped in thought.

"Is this a hobby of yours?" Nic asked.

"Buying wines like this? No way. I usually drink Gallo." He finished the wine. "I have to tell you something. That was my uncle who owned Graystone Manor—and the wine collection."

"Your uncle?"

"Yes—and I am his sole heir."

"His heir?" Nic said faintly. "But in that case, you'll be getting his whole wine cellar, won't you?"

Cedric nodded. "That's right."

"Then the cellar is really yours, isn't it?"

"I guess it is."

"So you didn't have to pay eighteen hundred and fifty dollars for this one bottle!"

Nic was beginning to feel like Dr. Watson, desperately trying to follow the explanations of the Great Detective as to how he made his deduction, which was about to be revealed as so simple that the good doctor would not be able to understand how he had not found it obvious.

"Let's see what's in the minibar," said Cedric, getting to his feet. "They might have some better stuff in there."

"Extraordinary!" Roger chuckled. "I really handed you a live one this time, didn't I, Nic!"

They sat in Roger's office, where Nic had just recounted the story of his visit to the auction at Graystone Manor.

"So," Roger went on, "presuming you found a drinkable vintage in the minibar—why did Cranston pay eighteen fifty for one bottle of what was his own property?"

"We emptied the minibar of Champagne," Nic said, "in the course of getting the whole story out of him—it was Mumm's, you will be glad to hear. It was like this . . .

"Uncle Harold was a self-made man, very proud of his achievement in making millions in the scrap and recycling business.

"He liked to play the country squire, but he was always uneasy about his position as a nouveau-riche among the old moneyed families—"

"—and San Francisco has plenty of those," said Roger.

"It certainly does," Nic agreed. "In order to establish himself among that hierarchy, Uncle Harold first began by buying Graystone Manor and throwing big dinner parties. He accumulated a very reputable cellar, but here a strong rivalry emerged. Many of his neighbors were wine connoisseurs and had cellars

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that would rate with any in the country—"

"Bless their vinous hearts," Roger said piously. "I trust they were among our clients."

"I intend to follow up on that," Nic said and Roger nodded approvingly. "Anyway, fierce argument arose on one occasion over the merit of a particular wine and Uncle Harold decided to play a trick at his next dinner party.

"He bought a bottle of Leoville-Barton Bordeaux '59 and a bottle of supermarket Bordeaux and switched the labels—"

"Pardon another interruption, Nic, but how did Cranston know this?"

"He paid a surprise visit and walked in on his uncle making the switch."

"In flagrante delicto!" Roger cried.

"Exactly. His uncle, of course, swore Cedric to secrecy—"

"But what happened with—?"

Nic cut in on the question. "What happened was that his uncle died the day before the dinner. The family lawyer told Cedric he would inherit the property and everything in it. Cedric had no desire to live in the manor, all he wanted to do was sell it. The will called for auctioning off the entire wine collection as it was so valuable but, of course, Cedric was worried that someone might discover the phony Leoville. If they did, it would throw suspicion on the entire cellar."

"It certainly would," agreed Roger.

"So being a conscientious sort of fellow, Cedric decided to get rid of the evidence. It seems he was really fond of his uncle and didn't like the thought that people might unmask him as a wine faker. They might not believe he would stop at one bottle and think he did it often. So Cedric decided to get rid of the evidence, but under the terms of the will, the lawyer had already notified Farringdon's, who had sealed up the whole cellar."

"Normal practice," nodded Roger.

"So when Cedric learned that it was to be an item by item sale, he hatched this plan. Having us buy it for him kept his name out of it."

Roger slapped the desk in amusement. "Great story, Nic!"

"It's not all," said Nic and his tone caught Roger's attention.

"Go on," Roger urged.

"I went back there yesterday. I concocted a story for the man from Farringdon's who was arranging disposal of the unsold items—I, er, allowed him to think we might be interested in some of them."

Roger smiled slightly. "Well, we might."

"It gave me access to the place, although there were few people

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around. Anyway, I got the opportunity to slip into the warehouse building I mentioned—the one that we passed on the way in."

Roger was fully focused now. "Go on."

"It was a small but efficient scrap and recycling operation. Equipment on a minuscule scale but all fairly new. Paper, cans, bottles, other miscellaneous stuff."

"No workers? They'd been let go?"

"Hadn't been any. Uncle Harold did it all himself. I was able to go through the place very thoroughly and I found what I was looking for—"

"I'm getting the inkling of where you're going with this," Roger murmured, "but keep going, Nic."

"I found enough to convince me that the faked bottle of Leoville-Barton Bordeaux '59 wasn't a one-off, get-the-better-of-his-wine-drinking-friends stunt at all. He could select the paper he wanted, he had a very expensive color printer so he could make labels, he had his pick of bottles, and I even found, hidden away, a barrel load of corks. Of course, he could still have been interested in making pilot runs of recycling methods and processing ordinary scrap—but that made a convenient cover for his secret hobby—"

"Uncle was running a small business in phony wines."

Roger completed Nic's exposition. "And you think Nephew Cedric didn't know about it?"

"It's possible he knew, but more likely, he had a sneaking suspicion that he didn't want to share with anyone. He seems to have had a genuine liking for his uncle and wouldn't want to see him exposed."

"And after all," said Roger, "what's another few dozen bottles of faked wine among all the thousands out there already, most of them engineered by experts, making our lives difficult?"

Nic nodded, but his smile was wry. "Or could it have been a few hundred bottles? And which wines?"

Roger regarded him thoughtfully. "As a matter of fact, that brings us to what I had in mind in the first place—the shady tactics, the scams and scandals—"

"The substitutions, the fakes and frauds," completed Nic. "Yes, I remember."

"Sounds like you're just the man for the job," Roger said heartily. "Just one thing though—" His tone grew solemn. "—the villains may not all be as benevolent as Uncle Harold. There's big money out there, Nic, and the people making it are not only serious but deadly serious—and I mean deadly."

"I'd like to take a crack at it," said Nic.

"Good man! Maybe in you we have Sancerre's answer to Sam Spade—wasn't he another of San Francisco's favorite sons?"

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SHOES

SCOTT MACKAY

Linc, alone in the class, got up, went to the front, opened Mr. Gonzalez's drawer, and found an Exacto knife. Could blood freeze? He walked to the window, looked at the parking lot, and saw it filling with cars. He glanced at the basketball court and wondered if he would ever play hoops again. Without Madmaxx, it wouldn't be the same. Dull January light struggled through the glass, and a few snowflakes fell from the sky. Linc opened the window, clenched his teeth, and drew the blade across his finger.

He had to squeeze the blood out. He smeared it onto the concrete windowsill. Not good enough. Madmaxx always said that. So Linc cut deeper, and this time got a decent flow. The blade was both hot and cool against his skin, with something satisfying yet terrifying about the way it sank into his flesh.

Blood fell in drops, bright round rubies, a pattern of dots like his chording chart at home, Madmaxx always saying no one played guitar the way Linc did, going to be a big star one day, the next Hendrix, the next B. B. King. Blood, at first steaming in the cold of a Detroit winter morning, then hardening.

Dilbert came in and said, "Close the friggin' window," so Linc closed it because Dilbert was like Papa Smurf, someone you had to fear. Linc glanced at the blood outside the closed window. Was it freezing? He couldn't tell. He went to his science bench, got a paper towel, and wrapped his finger. He walked to the front, put the Exacto knife back, and returned to his seat.

Dilbert was smiling at him.

"What you lookin' at?" said Linc.

"I'm lookin' at you, boy."

"Ain't nothin' to see here."

But Dilbert stared, sitting at his own science bench, round and big, sure of his place in the universe, keeping the secret of Madmaxx's murder buried under all that bling.

Other students drifted in, and the noise level went up. Mr. Constanza came in, then went out. Niveda came in. She was dark, a puma woman in an expensive leather jacket. Not about shoes, but about Niveda.

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Mr. Constanza came back.

Over the next several minutes he taught chemical equations.

But Linc was too busy solving his own equations.

X plus Y didn't necessarily equal Z. Not about a pair of shoes, but about Niveda, he was sure of it.

Papa Smurf came in at quarter past nine, shoulders jerking back and forth, head held high, smelling like Camels, do-rag on his head, bling-bling everywhere, and no late note from the office.

Mr. Constanza said, "Take your seat, Mr. Guthrie."

But Papa Smurf didn't take his seat. He came over and sat next to Linc. Linc's fear opened wide and hurtful. He thought Mr. Constanza might tell Mr. Guthrie to go to his usual seat, but the science teacher continued with his chemical equations, his voice tight, like he knew what was going on but was too scared to say anything. Dilbert glanced. Niveda glanced.

Papa Smurf said, "We good?"

In a huge betrayal of Madmaxx, Linc said, "We good."

"Water under the bridge, my friend. Got killed for a pair o' shoes, that's all. Someone stole 'em away. Happens all the time. Had nothing to do with me. So stop guessin'. You wasn't there. How you know?"

Papa Smurf got up and took his seat.

Linc concentrated on his work, but kept wondering if his blood was freezing yet.

The class ended and he looked out the window.

Frozen solid.

Blood froze.

Like a cherry Popsicle.

He pictured it around Madmaxx's body, and it made him weak. He looked at the parking lot. Then at the gray sky. Then into the basketball court.

Madmaxx's Filas hung from the basketball hoop, a flash of yellow, like a pair of canaries tangled in shoelaces. And seeing Madmaxx's yellow shoes dangling from the netless hoop, Linc knew it wasn't about shoes, no, not at all, but about trophies, and big-game hunting, and a cockiness so twisted and disrespectful he knew he had to conquer his fear and bring Papa Smurf down. Detective Donaldson wasn't doing it. The shoes swayed in the wind. Not stolen but gloated over. Linc glanced at Papa Smurf. Now that class was over, Papa Smurf strutted toward the door, proud, insolent, and defiant. Papa Smurf wasn't afraid of Mr. Constanza, of Detective Donaldson, or of Linc.

But Linc would bring him down.

And Papa Smurf would burn.

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After school, he went to the basketball court.

He didn't see Papa Smurf, Dilbert, or Niveda, but that didn't matter—other students watched, and they were like vidcams attached to Papa Smurf.

Linc took out his cell, thumbed Detective Donaldson's number, and got Donaldson's voice mail, "I'm away from my desk right now, please leave a message," but Linc didn't leave a message.

He put his cell away and looked around. Snow fell. Snowflakes had always fascinated Madmaxx. "How can every one be different, Linc? In the whole history of the world, in every snowfall, every flake was different, an endless variety of them going back millions of years. And if you look at grains of sand on a beach you see the same thing. Each one is different."

Linc walked to the hoop and shimmied the pole.

A change came over the schoolyard, the same thing that happened to the hair on a cat's back when a dog got too close. He knew he didn't have much time if he wanted to take those shoes back to Madmaxx's mother. Mrs. Sameer would want those shoes. He was good at shimmying poles and reached the top a few seconds later.

He inspected the shoes for blood because wouldn't there have to be blood? But he saw no blood—the shoes were clean, too clean. Maytagged thoroughly. Their yellow fabric looked faded, the blue and red Fila logo blanched, and the laces white. Papa Smurf, thinking like a cop. Mr. Guthrie, taking science class one step further. X plus Y equals Z, but without proof, where did that leave him?

Didn't matter.

The jackals spilled through the chain-link gate like Russian soldiers over German lines, yanked him from the hoop, and then it was, "Leave the shoes alone," and a succession of kicks and punches that left him curled like the last of a species on the verge of extinction.

He lay there for a long time. He tasted blood. He looked at the shoes as they dangled in the wind. Maybe instead of Papa Smurf burning, he would be the one to burn. Another young black man, dead in the suburbs. But so much more—a young man who was going to be the next Hendrix, the next B. B. King, who understood the blues the way a physicist understood nature, not just another dead black man, but a whole universe of thought, feeling, and memory.

Like Madmaxx.

Now with his yellow Fila high-tops drooping from the rusted

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orange basketball hoop, obscene, a pair of lemony gonads, as good as parading Madmaxx's head on a stake.

His ma asked him what happened, but he wouldn't say.

His pa asked him what happened, but he wouldn't say.

They left him to his fear.

He climbed the stairs to his room.

The walls slanted to a low ceiling. A poster of Hendrix hung next to the window.

He lifted his Stratocaster from its case—slaved away all last summer at Starbucks, slinging café lattes and overpriced carrot cake so he could own it. Now he had this wonderful *Niña*, going to take him on the voyage of the century. Only for the last two weeks, ever since Madmaxx got killed, his hands had been cramped and his ears sour. He tried again, plugging the instrument into his mini-amp, riffing on Stevie Ray Vaughan's *Little Wing*, but the notes came out tinny and dead. Couldn't stop thinking about the Fila running shoes hanging from the basketball hoop, and it was sucking the life out of his music.

Meat loaf for supper, and the ketchup stung his lips, but he ate it anyway. He was big, rangy, had to eat, even if he didn't feel like it—his body was an eating machine.

As he ate, he brooded. He felt ashamed. He felt afraid. The jackals coming through the chain-link gate had been a warning. *Tread not upon Papa Smurf's trophy.* Taking those shoes down to give to Mrs. Sameer—was it really going to bring Madmaxx back? Madmaxx was never coming back. No more thumb gymnastics with Madmaxx on the Xbox. No more sneak-ins at the Showcase Cinema. No more concerts at the Fox. He drank his chocolate milk in a daze. Madmaxx was gone, and Linc felt he should have done more—should have reached out and grabbed on, should have yanked Madmaxx away from the puma woman before it had been too late, before Niveda had infected the whole thing with her voodoo. About a woman, not about shoes.

He tried a few more phrases of *Little Wing* after supper, but his hands wouldn't uncramp, and his ears were as deaf as Beethoven's, so he put his guitar away.

He sat on his bed, his mind going over the same thing again and again. Should have warned Madmaxx that his voice got too loud around Niveda, he talked too smart, and the shift of gravity from Papa Smurf to Madmaxx had been too strong for the puma woman to resist. Papa Smurf, jealous, had finally been forced to use, as he liked to say, his sacred relic, holding it in his palms like an offering. "Look at this, this be my gun, this be my ticket to

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power, you may look, but you may not touch," Papa Smurf always showing off his 9mm glory.

Tears burned. Always these tears at this time of night. His anger flared. Madmaxx, his main man. He had to do something about it. He took out his cell and thumbed the digits of Detective Donaldson's number. This time he got through. "Detective Donaldson, Homicide," a white man's voice, flat, unmelodic, with none of the sing-song of the 'hood in it.

"Is Lincoln Arnold," he said. "'Member you talk to me about Ahmed Sameer? You axe me questions about 'im?"

Long pause at the other end of the line, and Linc pictured cops scurrying all over the squad room, like he was a kidnapper calling with a ransom demand, and the call had to be traced, Donaldson pointing here, pointing there, a half-finished Big Mac at his elbow, a Coke with too much ice by the phone, other cops clicking away at computers, satellite maps coming to their screens, geocentric orbits changing, all the things Madmaxx said cops did when they were breaking a big case.

"Go ahead, Lincoln."

"You ain't recordin' me?"

"The line is clean. It's just you and me." Then a clumsy attempt at ghettoese. "What's up?"

The tears burned again and his hand shook, but he took a deep breath and got it under control. "His shoes show up on the basketball hoop at school. It ain't about no shoes. Take another look. Stolen shoes was just to throw you off, make you think it was robbery, close the case early."

"Lincoln, why don't you come forward? I'll guarantee complete anonymity."

"Don't want my blood freezin' in no back alley. And I ain't got proof. I wasn't there. But it ain't about no Fila pair o' shoes. Them shoes is hanging on the basketball hoop at school. See for yourself."

He thumbed Detective Donaldson into oblivion.

Make Detective Donaldson get the shoes so he might find something, use some special technique to get beyond the Maytagging, see what he could see, maybe see Madmaxx's ghost hanging around those shoes, telling Detective Donaldson who pulled the trigger.

His mother came upstairs. He wiped his tears away.

She came in and it was as if, through all his grief, he saw her for the first time: saw that she now had gray hair, and that there were chronic pouches of tiredness under her eyes, and that the buttons pulled too tightly on her Rent-A-Car work blazer, and that she

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wasn't the young mother who had once taken him to the playground, but a woman whose years were slipping away one by one.

Her face was creased with worry. "You want to tell me what happened?" she said, pointing to his fat lip and black eye.

"Can't talk about it, Mama."

Couldn't talk about it because he was scared. This wasn't the playground anymore. It wasn't some little kid pushing you, and you go crying to your mama about it. She looked powerless, with those tears in her eyes, like she was aching to help but couldn't. He refused to talk because Papa Smurf didn't fool around. Papa Smurf would make him pay. Would make his family pay. Stayed quiet because it was the right thing to do.

She finally padded downstairs, and he was left to his science homework, grade eleven chemistry, the molecular structure of ammonia, what happened when you added another oxygen; and he got caught up in the problem, even felt some of the old joy. Mr. Constanza said he was a bright kid, always told him if you were smart you could do anything.

He raised his eyebrows. He looked out the window.

If you were smart you could do anything.

Could he be smart about Madmaxx?

Could he solve the problem of Madmaxx like he was solving this one about ammonia?

And could he do it without winding up dead in a back alley somewhere?

Got to school the next day, Mr. Constanza's class, first period, looked out the window and saw that the shoes were gone. Yellow police tape threaded the fence.

Dilbert came in, and Linc could see it in Dilbert's eyes, the stare that told him he was next, that he had gone too far calling Detective Donaldson about the shoes. Who else could it be?

When Niveda got there, she observed him with new interest, the same way she had with Madmaxx, before Papa Smurf had felt compelled to use his sacred relic.

Linc was so scared he could hardly breathe.

Mr. Constanza was next. The teacher gave him a forsaken glance, one that told Linc that as much as he wanted to help, it was now beyond his control.

Yellow police tape. How could Detective Donaldson do this to him after his guarantee of anonymity?

He looked at the windowsill, his blood from the day before, and saw, tracked into the red, a pigeon's footprint, three front toes, a

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long back one, the bird landing just as the blood had been freezing. It made him feel sick.

He went back to his science bench. If you were smart you could do anything. Madmaxx always parroted those words. Mr. Constanza was Madmaxx's favorite teacher. But Linc didn't feel smart. He felt stupid. He felt like he was already dead. All because of Detective Donaldson's yellow tape.

Mr. Constanza told them to turn to page 183, they were going to look at sugars today.

Turned to page 183, but all he saw were Madmaxx's shoes dangling from the basketball hoop, then saw his own hanging there as well, another trophy for Papa Smurf, big game hunter.

Class started, and fifteen minutes later Papa Smurf strutted in, a mean look in his eyes as he swiveled on Linc.

Linc was sick of it.

He sat up straight, didn't look away, stared at Papa Smurf the same way Papa Smurf stared at him, mean and insolent. He wasn't going to take it anymore. Madmaxx deserved more than a gutless wonder for a friend.

They cornered him in the cafeteria at lunchtime, all three of them, and he knew that under their gangsta cockiness they were scared.

"We ain't good no more, Linc," Papa Smurf said.

Papa Smurf shook a can of grape pop and opened it in his face. Dilbert glanced around as if he were being hunted. Niveda's eyes narrowed and she looked confused, as if she had woken up in a strange bed after drinking too much the night before. The grape pop sprayed all over Linc's face, dripped down his chin, and onto his Oakland Raiders jersey. Papa Smurf gave him a shove. For some reason, Linc didn't feel scared anymore. He didn't care if he died. Now that he knew he was going to die, he felt free, and as if he could fight back.

"You gonna burn," he told Papa Smurf.

Papa Smurf poked him with a hard index finger. "And you gonna die."

The three moved off. Niveda gave Linc a backward glance. He could tell she wanted to stay, but he prayed she wouldn't, not when she was the reason Madmaxx was dead in the first place. All a big case of jealousy, not about shoes, no sir, not about shoes at all.

Jackals at a nearby table stared at Papa Smurf, then at Linc, and they had the dumb look of scavengers waiting for the next piece of carrion.

Detective Donaldson had to—absolutely *had* to—find something

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on Madmaxx's shoes. A fingerprint, a bloodstain, a hair, a fiber. If he didn't, Linc was a dead man.

Linc walked to the cafeteria napkin dispenser, got some napkins, and wiped the grape pop away.

Maybe the men from the thin blue line would be here this afternoon, after Detective Donaldson had had a chance to look at the shoes for evidence. Maybe they would arrest Papa Smurf, and even Dilbert and Niveda. Because which was worse, doing it, or standing by and watching it?

He went to the parking lot, opened his cell, scrolled to Detective Donaldson's number, and thumbed the automatic dial.

Waited a long time, listened to it ring eight times, smelled the grape pop on his jersey, watched pigeons walk around in the snow, pecking at a Wendy's Spicy Chicken, birds eating birds, leaving footprints everywhere. Rang and rang, but he finally got through, and asked Detective Donaldson about the shoes. Detective Donaldson said that the men from the thin blue line had come to get them last night, and that the technicians had studied them all morning.

"But they're clean, Linc. Strong detergent residue and some trace blood, Ahmed's blood, but nothing else."

Linc's fear foamed like liquid nitrogen, spreading through his body in a cold and numbing cloud. He would be dead by sunset. His ma would be another Mrs. Sameer, sad, lonely, and missing her only child.

"You sure?"

"I'm sure, son."

Not good enough. There had to be something he could do before his blood wound up freezing in a back alley.

In gym class, the first thing Papa Smurf did was grab him by the back of the neck and smash his head into the locker room wall.

Neon dots jumped to his eyes, like fairies of pain summoned by the Smurfmaster. Linc's legs grew wobbly, and he slumped to the floor. He nearly lost contact, but pulled himself out of it just in time to hear Papa Smurf say, "You a dead man, Linc."

He sat on the floor in his gym shorts, feeling sick to his stomach because the pain was so bad, smelling the stink of his own fear through the Mountain Air scent of his sports deodorant, all the jackals walking out to the gym, ignoring him, no one helping him.

He heard the whistle blow in the gym. Mr. Quantz barked, and the boys played basketball, the ball dribbling with painful whacks up and down the hardwood floor.

He pushed himself up. The bile rose in his throat, but he

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choked it down. He touched his forehead, felt a warm wet bump forming, pulled his fingers away, and saw blood, not much, but enough to make him think of blood the way Madmaxx might. Could blood freeze? He thought of his own blood on the windowsill. He thought of the pigeon print in the blood. And it was then that the heavens opened, and sunlight flooded through, and he realized that the whole thing was about shoes after all, only not about Madmaxx's shoes, but about a different pair, Papa Smurf's size 14 Nikes, the Smurfmaster's bright red Shox Ride 2s, worn day in and day out, picking up scratches and nicks, thousands of identifying characteristics, so they at last had their own pattern, as individual as a snowflake, and as unique as the grains of sand on a beach.

He got out of his gym uniform and put on his street clothes. He checked his wallet, had seventeen dollars, enough to get him downtown. He walked to the garbage can, lifted the bag out, and found extra ones beneath, ready for the janitor. He took out a spare bag and stuffed the regular one back in.

He walked to Papa Smurf's cubbyhole, retrieved the Shox Ride 2s, turned them over, and inspected the soles the way a palm reader might look at lifelines. Nicks and dents, even a chunk missing from the left one—a pair of shoes like no other, a snowflake, a grain of sand, uniquely identified, perfectly designed to leave an impression in half-frozen blood, like that pigeon print on the windowsill.

Papa Smurf had written his name on the inside, "Alexander Guthrie," as well as his telephone number. Case closed.

Linc slid the shoes into the bag, left the locker room, exited the school by the back, and took the bus downtown.

Got to the police station and went inside. Cops all around, but they hardly gave him a look. He approached the duty desk, said to the desk sergeant that he was Detective Donaldson's friend, they played hoops together. Detective Donaldson had forgotten his shoes, and here they were, in this garbage bag, could you make sure he got them?

The desk sergeant opened the bag, looked inside, and backed away. "They stink."

"They stink all right." And Linc wondered if all killers had the same stink. "But they be special. Tell him that. They be one of a kind."

The desk sergeant's eyes narrowed.

Before the desk sergeant could put it together, Linc moved off.

He didn't go home, couldn't go home, went to the library instead.

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He called and left a message for his ma and pa. "Don't worry about me, I be fine. I ain't comin' home tonight, but I be fine."

He sat in the DPL's Main Library on Woodward Avenue, a Wednesday night so it was open till eight, and read *Guitar World*, interviews with newer guitarists—Warren Haynes, David Chastain, and Derek Trucks. Chilled there until they finally kicked him out, but still didn't go home, stayed away from home, protecting his ma and pa.

He left the library and wandered Detroit's cold streets. The snow had been packed by people walking on it, and was as dirty as a doormat.

He walked to keep warm. He rubbed his hands repeatedly. The cold wind blew from Canada and he knew that he should have worn gloves, that he had to learn how to keep better care of his hands if he was going to be the next Hendrix. He tried to form, midair, a flat-nine chord, but his hands were so stiff, his fingers wouldn't cooperate, and he finally gave up.

Went to a jazz club, but they kicked him out because he was underage. Not good enough. Madmaxx always telling him that. Always getting him to strive for better.

So he went to another, and the doorman let him stay because he was a musician and wanted to learn. As he sat there, he felt some of the old thrill coming back, especially when the guitarist played a blues lick. He was reminded of all the hours he and Madmaxx had sat in his room listening to music, and how Madmaxx, just by his presence, had made the music mean something. For the first time since the murder, his hands loosened. He touched his finger calluses over and over again, remembering how Madmaxx had once called them miracles of determination.

He wanted to stay all night, but the club closed and he had to go, so he wandered around some more, walking, walking, trying to keep his blood moving. Blood froze. Sometimes, after a concert at the Fox, he and Madmaxx would walk around. Sometimes they would go to the library together. He was going to miss Madmaxx. Madmaxx was his friend. His main man. And he would never have a main man like Madmaxx again

The sun rose over the Detroit River, and by that time the soles of his shoes had picked up a few more identifying nicks and dents of their own.

He phoned Detective Donaldson, but all he got was voice mail.

He went to school because they wanded for weapons at school, and at least he would be safe there for a while.

He called his ma and pa and said he was okay, and his ma asked, "Where are you?"

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"At school, ma. Same as always. Papa Smurf show up?"

"No, son, he didn't."

That made him feel good.

He went inside, the security guard wanded him, and once he got past the checkpoint, he knew he could rest easy.

He went to his homeroom, Mr. Constanza's class, was the first one there as usual, but after a while the jackals drifted in, and they all stared at him as if they couldn't understand why he wasn't a piece of carrion freezing in a back alley yet.

Dilbert came in, and Dilbert kept glancing at the ceiling like he thought it was going to cave in. Niveda arrived and she looked bewildered, as if she had studied for a science exam all night only to discover it was an English exam. Mr. Constanza came in and gave Linc a quick glance, a grin on his face, the kind of grin you saw on dogs when they were having their bellies scratched.

Linc waited for Papa Smurf, but the Smurfmaster didn't show up.

Instead, two officers from the thin blue line arrived, and Mr. Constanza went out to talk to them.

A minute later he came back, and it was, "Niveda, Dilbert, could you please come out to the hall?"

Niveda and Dilbert went out to the hall. Some of the jackals looked at Linc, as if they couldn't figure out how someone so low on the food chain could still be alive, but Linc kept his eyes down. Mr. Constanza came in, and Linc heard footsteps fading down the hall, the door to the stairwell opening, then closing, then silence, Dilbert and Niveda being led away by the men of the thin blue line.

Mr. Constanza stood at the front as if in a trance. He gave Linc another glance, the same glance he sometimes gave Madmaxx when Madmaxx had A-plussed a test, then told the class to turn to page 187, they were going to look at alkalies today. Madmaxx, his main man, always at the top of the class, and now hovering with remarkable clarity above page 187.

After a minute, Linc couldn't concentrate on page 187. He stared out the window at the parking lot. The two men from the thin blue line led Niveda and Dilbert to a police car. And Linc thought, X plus Y equaled Z after all, because which was worse, pulling the trigger, or watching someone else pull it?

On his cell to Detective Donaldson later, he learned that the equation was a little more complicated than X plus Y equals Z, that it had the complexity of adding an oxygen atom to an ammonia molecule.

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"We picked Alexander up late last night. Alexander says Dilbert did it, and Dilbert swears Alexander did it, and Niveda's waiting to see what she can get out of the deal before she decides which way she'll go. It doesn't matter. They're all going down."

"So you got the shoes?"

"They were one of a kind, Lincoln, just like you said."

Linc asked if he could have Madmaxx's shoes back. "Got to give 'em to Mrs. Sameer."

Linc got them back after one week.

He walked down the long, bungalow-lined street to Mrs. Sameer's house. Linc wondered what Mrs. Sameer thought of all this, her life in America, coming from Qatar twelve years ago, a widow, wanting a fresh start for Ahmed, only to have Ahmed's blood freezing in a back alley, life's long road leading her to a place she never wanted to go.

He knocked on the door and she answered. She looked shrunken, worn by grief, her brown face as wrinkled as the shell of a walnut, her gold earrings hanging like desert flowers on her sagging lobes.

"Thank you," she said, her English sounding strange. "Thank you."

That's all she said because Mrs. Sameer had never mastered English.

Had gotten Madmaxx to translate everything for her.

Now she would have to learn.

Linc walked away, wondering if doing the right thing had made a difference. He didn't feel good, the way he thought he would.

He just felt it was over.

And was that good enough?

The wind picked up and blew snow against his legs.

Maybe that's all he could hope for. It wasn't the same as having Ahmed walk through the classroom door every morning, but at least he now felt the music coming back. He lifted his collar around his neck to protect it from the cold. The crampiness was leaving his hands, and the sweetness was coming back to his ears. And because of that, he knew the riffs would come easily tonight.

He would play for Ahmed when he got home.

And Ahmed would be there, in the music.

A part of the beat.

Elevating the blues. *Becoming* the blues.

His main man, once again.

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DYING WORDS

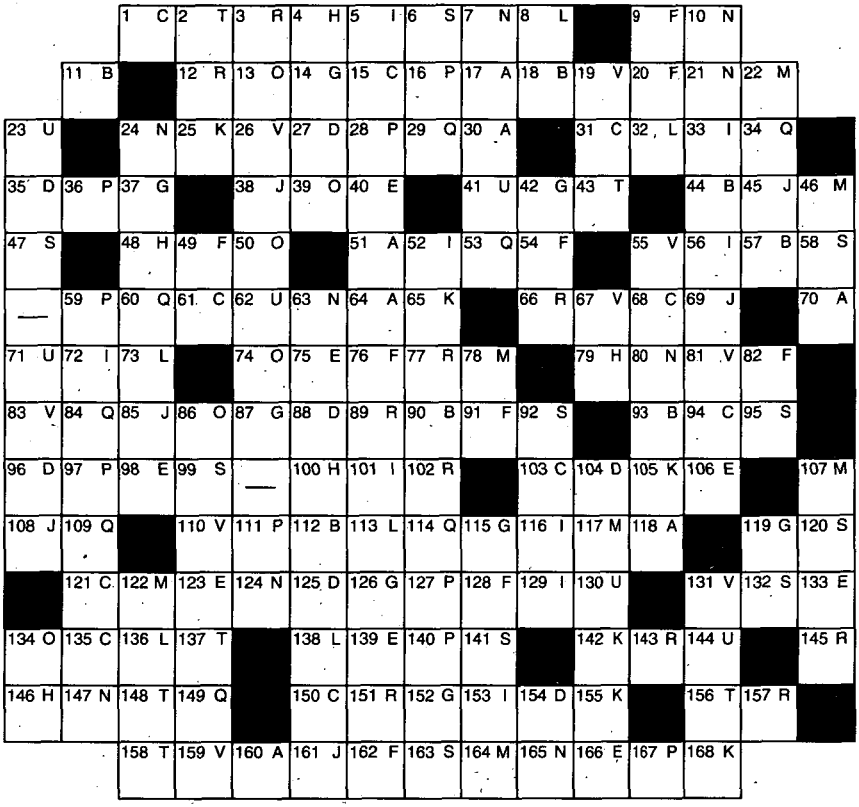


ACROSTIC BY ARLENE FISHER

For instructions on how to solve the acrostic puzzle, turn to page 15. The solution to the puzzle will appear in the March issue. The solution to last month's puzzle is on page 143.

DEFINITIONS	WORDS
A. One out of the spotlight: hyph. wd.	70 17 160 51 64 118 30
B. Drama by Euripides	11 57 90 112 44 18 93
C. Eleventh-hour words	94 15 1 150 61 31 103 135 121 68
D. Whip material	88 35 27 104 125 96 154
E. Turkish saber	106 75 40 98 133 139 123 166
F. Consequence of a disaster	91 128 20 82 49 76 162 9 54
G. Stand offering	152 87 14 119 126 115 37 42
H. Unfaithful	146 48 79 4 100
I. In an apparent way	52 116 72 5 56 129 33 153 101
J. Pattern of flow	108 38 69 161 45 85
K. Subject of "Quills": 2 wds.	65 25 168 142 155 105
L. Conductor's lack: 2 wds.	138 32 136 73 113 8
M. Deliverance	164 22 117 122 107 78 46
N. Lived in	80 124 10 165 24 21 147 7 63
O. Taurus follower	134 50 86 13 74 39

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P. Ursine series: 2 wds.
127 97 111 167 16 28 59 140 36

Q. Proboscidean critter
29 60 109 114 34 84 149 53

R. Start of a Glen Campbell hit
143 89 151 3 102 12 66 145 157 77

S. Perfectionist, maybe: hyph. wd.
120 132 58 92 141 99 163 6 95 47

T. Disregard
156 137 43 2 158 148

U. Theda Bara role
23 71 130 62 41 144

V. Thumb
67 19 26 55 131 83 110 81 159

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After the Fall

ELAINE VIETS

Mort was walking down the street Monday morning when a woman landed *splat!* on the sidewalk, right in front of him.

She burst like a water balloon, and Mort was splashed with a tidal wave of blood and little dots of gray-white that he couldn't identify. Then he could and his stomach heaved. He was already dizzy from the coppery smell of the blood. He was starting a sickly sway when a man in a dirty white apron ran out of Sammy D's Deli and said, "Whoa, pal, where are you hurt? You been shot? Don't worry, we've called an ambulance."

"It's not my blood," Mort said. "It's hers." He pointed to the small twisted figure on the sidewalk. That steadied him somehow, and he was able to go on without fainting or throwing up.

"Jesus," the deli man said. "She must have jumped."

They both looked up and saw curtains flapping out of an open window far, far above them.

"You're darn lucky," the deli man said. "A few inches more and she would have landed on you. She would have killed you dead."

The EMS people told Mort he was lucky too, as they took him to the hospital, where he was scrubbed down with a horrible harsh disinfectant that clogged his sensitive nasal passages. It smelled of cherries, like some perverted candy.

"Sorry," the nurse said when he complained of the smell, "but we have to do this for your protection. Bodies are crawling with bacteria."

Mort felt queasy all over again at the unseen horrors invading his sensitive skin, burrowing into his nose and distorting his taste buds. For Mort Heffern was an ordinary man in every way but one. He was average height: five feet seven. He was ordinary looking, with a little round paunch and small brown eyes. His thin, tan hair was receding. Well, to be honest, it had already receded.

Yet ordinary Mort enjoyed many extraordinary delights, including a luscious blond wife, a five-bedroom house in Nyack, New York, and a bottle-green Range Rover because of one unusual feature. Mort's sense of taste was superbly sensitive. It was so sensitive

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Kelly Denato

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that he was a coffee taster for a top New York firm. Mort's taste buds could distinguish Kona (which he considered overrated) from Kenya AA. He could even tell you the slope where the coffee beans grew.

To protect his precious taste buds and their ally, his nose, Mort never smoked. He'd only had one cigarette in his life, back when he was sixteen, before he decided to become a taster and forsake smoking for the rarer and more exquisite pleasure of tasting. Sometimes, he thought about that one smoke. But mostly he thought about all the good things his taste buds brought him because he didn't smoke.

Naturally, he did not drink. Nor did he wear cologne or use scented soap, and he did not permit his luscious wife, Jasmine, to use them, either. When he first met her, Jasmine was as fragrant as her namesake flower, but he couldn't tolerate living with such a strong scent. She gave it up for him. Mort lavished Jasmine with jewelry to console her for her loss.

Now his taste buds and nose were clogged with the ugly scent of the woman's death and the overpowering odor of that disgusting cherry disinfectant. Mort had no idea what the woman looked like in real life. He caught only a flash of pale arms, flailing legs, and wide, horrified eyes, before she hit the pavement and made a splash.

He didn't mean to be flip about the woman's terrible death. He was shaken, that's all. He called the office of Percardian and Sons from the hospital and explained why he wouldn't be at work that day. Mr. Percardian Senior was sympathetic.

"Take a couple of days off," he said. "Shock can throw off your taste buds."

Mort slept badly that night. He couldn't get that *splat!* out of his mind. The sound was like something out of a cartoon, except that a woman had exploded like a ripe watermelon on the sidewalk and showered him with her blood.

Finally, after tossing and turning and awakening Jasmine several times, Mort got up and sat in the living room. He wished he had a cigarette. He could see it, glowing in the dark night. He could taste it. But he didn't. He showered three times, trying to remove the smell of disinfectant. But his powerful smelling and tasting apparatus could still detect the faint traces of the cloying candy-like scent.

At six A.M., when the newspaper arrived, Mort looked for a story about the dead woman. It was on page six. He learned that she was Patricia Henley Daniels, forty-seven, a special education teacher. She was married to Decameron Daniels, fifty-one, a stock-

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broker with Wayne-Symmons. The accident occurred at about seven thirty Monday morning. Her husband told police that he had been dressing in their bedroom when he heard a noise and noticed the living room window was open. He said his wife had been depressed about her father's recent death from cancer. Patricia had jumped or fallen twenty-one stories to her death.

In her photo, Patricia looked small and pretty. She had large dark eyes, curly dark hair, and a friendly smile. She looked like the sort of person you would want to teach your child. Mort felt sad that she had ended her useful life on a Manhattan sidewalk.

Mort was mentioned too in the news story: "Police said the deceased had fallen close to a passerby on the sidewalk, Mort Heffern, forty-two, of Nyack. Heffern was not injured."

"Not injured" indeed, thought Mort, as he replayed that awful *splat!* in his mind and smelled the odor of cherry disinfectant. His hands shook so badly the newspaper rattled.

He stayed home that day as his boss, Mr. Percardian, advised. Mort was pale and tired and everything still tasted of hospital disinfectant. He showered every hour, praying the insinuating cherry scent would leave his nostrils.

He ate sparingly, hoping the blandness of white meat of turkey and whole wheat bread would restore his tortured taste buds. But under the soothing taste of prime turkey breast he caught the corrupting cherry tang. Even sharp English mustard on his sandwich did not remove it.

He tried to nap between his several showers, but every time he closed his eyes, he saw the flailing limbs of Patricia Henley Daniels. Now the dead woman had a face, and he saw those dark eyes, pleading with him to save her in the last dreadful seconds of her life. Then he heard the *splat!*

"Are you still carrying on about that jumper?" Jasmine was filled with wifely concern. "You should be glad she didn't land on you. You're lucky."

"Lucky!" Mort snapped, his patience at an end. "Everyone keeps saying I was lucky. I was nearly killed. I keep seeing that poor woman hitting the sidewalk. It was awful."

"Poor baby," Jasmine said. "Maybe you need some sleeping pills or something."

But Mort couldn't take sleeping pills. They made his tongue feel as if it was covered with fur and that interfered with his tasting.

Jasmine made his favorite comfort food that night, homemade tomato-vegetable soup. But the bits of vegetables and rice reminded him of the odd bits and specks the nurse had cleaned off him. And the soup was blood red. He pushed his bowl away,

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feeling nauseated. Jasmine looked hurt, but she bravely tried to understand.

"Not hungry, baby?" She kissed his broad forehead. "You must try to eat something. I got your favorite dessert."

She returned with another soup bowl, this one filled with Cherry Garcia ice cream. He could smell the revolting cherry odor before she walked through the dining room door. His stomach gave a mighty heave and he barely made it to the bathroom in time. Patricia's death resulted in another tragedy. Cherry Garcia had been ruined for Mort for all time, and he mourned the loss.

Mort couldn't sleep that night, either. Or rather, he would doze off until he saw Patricia in front of him, helplessly clawing the air in the last futile seconds of her life. He would hear the *splat!* her body made and wake up, panting and sweating, sheets twisted around him, Jasmine blinking unhappily in the light he'd so rudely turned on.

Once more he got up and sat in the living room, staring out the window, wishing for a cigarette, until the morning paper arrived. Today, there were interviews with Patricia's friends and colleagues saying what a fine person she was. There was more news: The police were investigating her death as "suspicious," although the story didn't say why.

Mort spent another day at home, showering, sipping bottled water, and nibbling white meat of turkey. His resilient taste buds were beginning to recover. The dreadful stink of cherries was retreating from his nostrils. Jasmine gave him the comfort of her sweet, unscented self, but did not fix him any food that day. He still heard the *splat!* in his dreams, and he still sat up most of the night, waiting for dawn and wishing for a cigarette.

It was an exhausted Mort who went out on his porch for the paper that morning. But he woke up when he saw Patricia's name on the front page. The story said the police had arrested Patricia's husband, Decameron, for her murder.

The police said Patricia had not been depressed about her father's death, as her husband claimed. Her friends said she rarely saw the bad-tempered old man and was pleasantly surprised when he'd left her a million dollars. Six days before her death, Patricia discovered that Decameron was having an affair with a woman at his brokerage firm. Patricia had been planning to dump her unfaithful husband without a penny.

The police said Decameron had killed his wife so that he could inherit her million dollars and marry his cookie. They found suspicious-looking scratches on Decameron's hands and arms that indicated Patricia had fought for her life.

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The paper showed a photo of the woman Decameron supposedly had the affair with. She was a blonde of about forty, who looked like a B-movie adulteress. Mort thought she was cheap and obvious compared to pretty little Patricia. As far as Mort was concerned, Decameron had no taste.

But Mort did. His delicate taste buds had recovered, despite his tiredness. He was ready to return to work. But when he got to the block where it happened, he heard that horrible wet *splat!* rend the air and saw Patricia's windmilling limbs again. He walked two blocks out of his way to avoid the awful vision and ran smack into a coffee cart featuring warm cherry Danish. The smell was so unnerving, he went yet another block out of his way. He arrived at work half an hour late, jumpy as a bishop in a brothel.

His hands shook and he craved a cigarette so badly he could taste it. He knew it would destroy his career, but he thought only a soothing smoke could blot out the horrible *splat!* and erase the smell of that sickening cherry disinfectant.

After six more sleepless nights, Mort gave in. He drove to an all-night convenience store and found the same brand he'd smoked at sixteen: Lucky Strikes. It was three A.M. He went outside and lit up on his back porch. As he breathed in the first smoke, he felt the nicotine course through him and got a buzz he hadn't felt in years. A pleasant buzz, better than coffee, more soothing. Yet he felt more alive at the same time. It was just the jolt his system needed. He watched the white smoke curl upward to the stars, and smelled only burning tobacco and cool night air. The vile odor of cherries was gone.

Of course, he could never smoke again. He knew that. He finished his cigarette and buried the butt in the garden. Then he washed his pajamas and showered and scrubbed his teeth until the cigarette smell was gone. Finally, exhausted, he fell into a dreamless sleep.

At breakfast, he craved another cigarette with his morning paper. He read a story that said Patricia's husband Decameron had hired Jasper J. Cowell as his attorney. Cowell said his client was innocent and he would prove it.

Mort was afraid. Cowell had a reputation for twisting facts and confusing witnesses so that his guilty clients went free. Poor Patricia would never receive justice and neither would Mort. Patricia's death had shattered his nerves, upset his delicate tasting apparatus, and ruined any enjoyment of cherries forever.

Mort worried that Patricia's husband would escape punishment, as so many wealthy wife killers had before him. The cigarette craving grew worse. At lunch, he went to La Jeunesse, to treat

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himself to a civilized French meal. But alas, the day's special was duck breast in cherry sauce, and the restaurant was permeated with the fowl odor. Mort left and had a bland turkey sandwich from the coffee shop in his office building. He still wanted a cigarette. He wanted it at one thirty and at three and at six and ten that night. He didn't give in to his craving until three o'clock in the morning.

As he puffed on the cigarette in his garden, Mort promised himself he'd never smoke at the office.

He kept that promise one week.

It was Mr. Percardian Senior who caught Mort on the third-floor landing of the fire stairs, blowing smoke out the window.

"I am sorry," Mr. Percardian said. "I know that you have been under a strain recently. But you know the rules. Smoking destroys the taste buds. Even one cigarette is enough to ruin them forever, and from the yellow stains on your teeth and fingers, this is not your first cigarette. When I noticed them, I suspected as much, and followed you. I must let you go."

Mort left the office where he'd worked for more than seventeen years, engulfed in shame and rage. He was no longer a coffee taster and he could never be one again. Mr. Percardian would see to that. Mort had loved his job. He was not one more cog in the great mercantile machine of New York, but a big wheel in his world. Now he was a jobless nobody. His beautiful young wife Jasmine, used to the little luxuries he could provide, would leave him when he didn't have any money.

But she did not.

"Don't worry, baby," she said. "I know you're disappointed, but now you can work for my brother's dotcom company. You'll make a ton of money, even more than you did as a coffee taster. And I can wear perfume again."

Mort went to work for his brother-in-law, a grinning dipwad who called him Buddy, just like he called everyone else, because he couldn't remember names. Mort made more money than he had as a coffee taster. But he was unhappy. He hated this meaningless work. He couldn't even drink the office coffee. Dipwad bought it in bulk from an office supply company. It tasted like warm mulch.

Mort missed the prestige of his old job. Decameron the wife-murderer had a lot to answer for. He'd killed Mort's career. He'd murdered Mort's sleep. Mort was awakened by that fatal *splat!* at least once a night. Then he'd sit up the rest of the night smoking.

Mort followed the approaching murder trial in the papers. Decameron's lawyer was using every possible delaying tactic and

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dirty trick, but the prosecuting attorney promised that the wife killer would get life in prison.

Good. Maybe then Mort would once more sleep easy. Maybe he would get through a day without sneaking around for a cigarette like a teenager. Mort couldn't smoke in his dipwad brother-in-law's office, because it was bad for the computers. He sneaked smokes around the Dumpster with half a dozen other nicotine renegades, his sensitive nose assaulted by the stench of garbage, until the healing cigarette smoke blotted out the odor.

Mort returned home each night to find his wife drenched in jasmine scent. The bathroom reeked of jasmine soap, lotion, and bubble bath, and his delicate nostrils itched in protest. But Jasmine refused to give up her perfume, no matter how many blue boxes from Tiffany's Mort brought her.

"It was one thing to give up perfume for your job, Mort. But now you want me to give it up because you're so sensitive. Well, I'm sensitive too." Jasmine looked mean when she said that. He didn't remember giving her that tennis bracelet on her shapely arm.

"Where did you get that . . ." he started to say "bracelet," but then realized she might tell him, and changed his sentence to "scratch on your arm?"

"From my kitten, Puss-Puss." She opened the garage door and out strutted a white hairball with malicious blue eyes. "Puss-Puss is a gift from a friend."

The only thing that Mort hated more than perfume was cats. Jasmine had never had one before. The litterbox odor permeated the house, even if Jasmine did keep it in the basement. But Mort was afraid to ask who the cat-giving friend was. Jasmine might tell him. In fact, she seemed to be daring him to ask.

Mort began adding scotch to his nightly smokes. The booze blotted out the olfactory assaults caused by his wife's perfume and her cat. After a few drinks, he didn't even mind the tumbleweeds of cat hair drifting around the house.

He started taking a scotch bottle to work to get him through the boredom of his dotcom days. He couldn't seem to negotiate the garage very well lately, and that caused a couple of little dents his bottle-green Rover, but he thought it only improved it. A tough vehicle was supposed to have a few dents.

When Jasmine complained, he bought her a red ragtop Eclipse. He did not buy her the crystal pendant that she hung on the ragtop's rearview mirror and he didn't ask where she got it. He was certain she was seeing someone else. He wondered when his marriage would be over.

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It ended the night he accidentally ran over Puss-Puss in the driveway.

"I'm sorry, Jasmine, I didn't see the cat," he said, as she cried over the crushed body.

"No," she spat back. "You saw two. You've been drinking for months. I can't take it any more."

The next day, when he came home from his dull dotcom job, his wife left him, or rather, she asked him to leave her. His bags were packed and waiting in the garage. The locks were changed on all the doors. He got a good lawyer. She had a better one.

Jasmine got the house, the ragtop, and a staggering amount of alimony. He couldn't possibly pay it, especially after his dipwad ex-brother-in-law fired him. He didn't care. Jasmine would leave him alone if there was no money. He found out she'd moved in with a car dealer—the same one who sold Mort her red Eclipse.

Mort traded in the bottle-green Range Rover for a 1978 Torino whose main color was Bondo gray, got a cheap apartment and a job delivering pizzas. Not even gourmet pizzas, but junk food made from frozen dough, canned tomato sauce, and cheese that melted like napalm. The smell revolted his twitching taste buds, but he ate the pizzas anyway. They were about all he could afford. That and scotch and smokes.

At night, Mort would drink and think about how Decameron the wife killer had ruined his life. He had been a happy man until that scumbag pushed his pretty wife out the window. Mort seethed with the injustice of one man ending two lives with a single push.

Mort arranged his life around Decameron's upcoming murder trial. He delivered pizzas after six P.M. By day he sat in on the trial. Mort and Patricia would have justice at last, and he would see it. At first, Mort was afraid he'd be called as a witness, but fortunately, his drinking and employment history made him too unreliable for either side to use. So he was free to be a spectator.

He looked with horror on the prosecution's exhibit photos of the dead woman splattered on the sidewalk. Her death was even worse than he dreamed. The photos added new color and depth to his nightmares.

He grew queasy as the experts described just how far twenty-one stories was from window to ground, and how long it would take a body to fall that distance. He thrilled with horror at the pathologist's description of what had happened to her body as it hit the sidewalk. Every bone was broken. Every bone.

Mort heard her late father's executor testify about Patricia's inheritance. Her attorney swore that she had made an appoint-

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ment to change her will and disinherit her husband. She died before she could keep it.

He saw the prosecution's photos of the scratches on Decameron's hands and arms. Poor little Patricia had fought like a wildcat before her husband threw her out the window. It was terrible. They found his skin under her broken nails.

But more terrible were the explanations of the defense. The crafty Cowell had a psychiatrist testify that it was "not uncommon to commit suicide within six weeks of losing a family member." Patricia's father had been dead for one month. The shrink also said that two-thirds of all suicides did not leave a note. Patricia had left no note.

Cowell produced a prescription for Prozac from her family doctor. Mort wished the good doctor did not look so much like a water rat, from his beady eyes to his shaggy gray suit. The man was hostile to the defense, insisting Patricia was "not the victim of a major depressive disorder." When Cowell finished with him, the doctor seemed incompetent.

Then Cowell put the woman Decameron was supposed to be having an affair with on the stand. Hannah Higginsworth looked nothing like her photo in the newspaper. Her mousy brown hair was pulled into an unflattering bun. Her suit was inexpensive brown polyester. It turned her complexion an ugly mud color. Her figure was positively maternal. Her nails were short and unpainted. Hannah said she was a victim of vicious office gossip and wept on the stand.

Mort knew the slick lawyer had pulled another of his tricks. He'd dressed Hannah like a frump and ordered her to gain weight. You could imagine her making cookies for the church bake sale, not hunting husbands.

Especially not Patricia's husband. On the stand he looked so smooth, so sincere, so handsome, that Mort knew Decameron had been rehearsed better than a Broadway actor.

The prosecutor could not break him. Yes, he had scratches on his hands and arms. He also had them on his back. His wife had made passionate love to him on the last morning of her life, then said, "Hold me one more time." Decameron thought she meant, "Hold me before I leave for work." He did not realize he was listening to her last wish.

A single manly tear made its way down his face. Decameron bravely ignored it. He loved his wife, he insisted. He would never kill her. He could not imagine having an affair with that woman, Hannah. He said her name with a sneer.

Cowell introduced photos of Decameron's back, slashed with

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scratches. Cowell claimed these were passion scars made by Patricia. She'd also scratched his hands and arms. Decameron said he did not tell the police about them when he was arrested because he was in shock. How could he remember a few scratches when his beloved wife was dead?

Mort thought that argument was clever, but flawed. The defense couldn't prove the scratches on Decameron's back were made by Patricia. Any woman could have made them any time—even Hannah before she cut her nails. Surely no one was buying that story?

Mort glanced at the jury. The women were smiling at Decameron. The men were nodding their heads in agreement.

At that moment, Mort knew there would be no justice for Patricia or for himself. The prosecutor's inept cross examination guaranteed it. Mort would never again have a peaceful night's sleep. He had lost his exceptional job, his desirable wife, and his handsome house, all because Decameron had tossed tiny Patricia out a window. One *splat!* and Mort's own dreams were dashed.

Mort did not wait around the courthouse for the not guilty verdict. He did not want to see the smile of triumph on Decameron's face. As it was, he saw it in the newspaper the next morning.

Mort spent the next month in a cigarette-and-scotch fog, but even these could not blot out the Technicolor re-enactments of Patricia's last moments. Somehow, he held onto his pizza delivery job. When the debauched fog cleared, he decided if the law could not provide justice, then he would deliver it to Decameron's door.

He spent another month watching Decameron and learning his habits. The killer still lived in the same co-op on the twenty-first floor, but not alone. A lush blonde went in and out as if she lived there too. It took awhile before Decameron recognized her as the maternal mud-colored brunette who cried on the witness stand. Hannah had lost weight, so that her figure was now curvaceous. Her curves were cuddled in colorful Escada suits. He knew the designer, because his own curvaceous ex-wife used to wear the same suits. Hannah's hair was now a stylish blonde. Her sensible shoes were replaced by spike heels. Hannah was definitely homewrecker material.

She stuck close by her man. Hannah rarely went out without Decameron. She wore him on her arm as if he was another flashy accessory. Mort noticed only one pattern. Every Tuesday night, without fail, Hannah left the apartment at eight P.M. and did not return until midnight. That was Mort's window of opportunity.

He decided Decameron would die next Tuesday night. He was not going to enjoy Patricia's money and Hannah's splendors much

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longer. Mort would see to that. He would have justice in four days.

Once he decided to kill Decameron, Mort slept better. In fact, for the first time since poor Patricia died, he began sleeping all night through, without that awful *splat!*

He gave up the booze and cigarettes. He wanted his mind clear the moment he killed Decameron. He wanted his wonderful olfactory apparatus to be working again. He wanted to smell Decameron's fear. He wanted to taste his triumph as the body went out the window.

Mort carefully plotted every detail. On Tuesday night, he drove into Manhattan, dressed in his pizza delivery uniform, which made him virtually invisible. He even found a legal parking space, which he took as a sign that God had smiled on his mission. He saw Hannah leave at eight o'clock. At eight fifteen, the bored doorman buzzed in Mort. He went up to the twenty-first floor and knocked on Decameron's door.

"Pizza!" he said.

Decameron came to his door and looked out the peephole at the balding, mild-looking man holding the pizza box.

He opened the door and said, "I didn't order—"

Mort had been made ox-strong by months of carrying pizzas in heavy insulated bags up to fourth-floor walkups. He hit Decameron with the full force of his rage and misery.

A stunned Decameron landed flat on the floor. Mort slammed the door and pulled out the tire iron from the pizza box. He broke Decameron's arms and legs with swift strokes. Decameron screamed in pain and terror.

Mort could taste his fear. It was bitter. Very bitter. And sweet. So very sweet.

"At the trial, the pathologist said your wife fought like a wildcat to live," Mort said. "You won't be able to fight me off. You can't kick me, either. And these broken bones won't be noticed at your autopsy, because all your bones will be broken in another moment, Decameron. You're going to join your wife."

Mort flung open the living room window while Decameron tried to scoot toward the door. He didn't get far. Mort dragged him across the polished wood floor toward the open window. He was careful to hold Decameron by his shoes, so there were no drag marks on the parquet.

Decameron moaned. "Why are you doing this?" he said, sounding like a dead man already.

"Because when your wife went out the window, so did my career," Mort said. "I was the man on the street when Patricia landed. The innocent bystander who was drenched with her blood.

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The horror that I saw cost me my job, my marriage, and my house. There was no justice for me in court. But I will have justice now."

He flung Decameron out the window. Mort heard him scream all the way down. Then he heard the *splat!* It was such a satisfying sound.

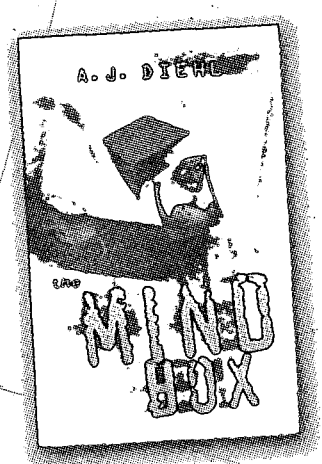
Mort looked out the window to see his triumph, twenty-one floors below. He saw a man standing on the sidewalk. An ordinary man. Drenched with Decameron's blood.

Mort was horrified. It was as if he was watching Patricia's death all over again, from a different, more terrible view—the same way God must have seen it.

"I didn't check to see if anyone was walking down the street," Mort wept. "I forgot to look."

But he would not forget now. ☙

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The Devil's Girlfriend

Brendan DuBois

Her name is Patti Barnes and she is forty-nine years old, lives in a small town in New Hampshire, and in her entire life she has lived in nine states across this great land. She works as a hairdresser and rents a four-room cottage with a rear deck that overlooks a slow-moving river and has a small fireplace. Through her years of living and accomplishments and travels, she is only certain of one thing: If she were to die right at this very moment, the first line of her obituary would read, Patti Barnes formerly of Steamboat Springs, Colorado, and one of several girlfriends of Ted Bundy, notorious serial killer . . .

There. And won't that make people reading their morning papers sit up and take notice when that day comes, though she hopes it doesn't come too soon.

Right now all she cares about is getting through her life, day by day, making a quiet and comfortable living wielding scissors and combs. Maybe not much of a career, but one that was recession-proof and depression-proof, especially in this time when hi-tech jobs are being streamed overseas to Calcutta and Lahore and Djakarta. People will still need to have their hair cut. That was something one of the parlor owners told her, out there in Seattle one year, back when the dot-commers saw their bank accounts and five-bathroom homes melt away like frost on a spring lawn. You can outsource everything from data processing to customer service, but no bright young boy with the dream of a million stock options by the time he was twenty-five was ever going to come up with a way to outsource haircutting.

The parlor owner—Katie, that had been the woman's name—was heavy and wore too much makeup and cracked a lot of un-PC jokes. A nice boss, but one day, like the others—the so very many others—when she found out that Patti had dated Ted Bundy, had once briefly been his lover, she whispered two things to her:

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"Oh, you poor girl."

And, later, almost hesitantly, "What was he like?"

This day starts off like so many others: up whenever she feels like it, for she hates having to get up at a particular time. She had grown up in a trailer in a place outside Steamboat Springs—laughingly called a park, though the scrub grass never grew more than three or four inches, and the wind whistling at night through the cracks in the sheet metal would sometimes keep her up at night, trembling in her small bed. Living there meant getting up at six twenty-five A.M. Monday through Friday to catch the bus, which meant walking down a dirt road for nearly a half mile. Saturdays and Sundays meant a whole ten or fifteen minutes more of sleep; there were always chores to do and sunlight was wasting, as her mom would tell her, coughing and wheezing after another three-pack-a-day habit burned through.

So today, she gets up at 8:11 A.M. for no particular reason, dresses in sweatpants and sweatshirt, and goes out to the small yard behind the cottage to start splitting wood. It's a cool morning in late May, and though there's no reason to be cutting wood—the cottage has a nice little oil furnace and the nights aren't cold enough anymore to start a fire in the woodstove—she still loves the exercise. She buys the wood in eighteen-inch-long chunks, and loves the sound of the axe whistling into the wood, the solid *chunk* when it lands, and the satisfying crack when the wood splits open. The yard, with shrubbery on two sides, is hidden from prying neighbors, and at the rear is a small stream called the Wonalancet. She breathes hard as she splits wood, and when she's done she goes back in and eats breakfast and showers up. As she dresses, she wonders if this will be the day when the whispers start up again.

She has told this story over and over again, to police detectives and attorneys general, and a judge or two, plus a number of newspaper reporters. Once an older woman researching a book—never written, Patti was sure, for she had never seen it listed on one of those bookselling Web sites—came to Colorado to talk to Patti about Ted Bundy and his crimes. She was a journalist and had brought with her a large notebook and even larger cassette recorder, which she delicately balanced on a coffee table that Patti had bought at a yard sale for ten dollars. Grace was her name. Sympathetic, yet she had been a slick and easy one. She starting off asking Patti about her background and her history, and Patti

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had enjoyed the attention, for Grace had been different, that's for sure. Quiet and nodding at all the right places. Patti told her about growing up in Steamboat Springs, an only child of a single mom, dad dead and unknown, living in that damn trailer that creaked and groaned when the winds came down out of the Rocky Mountains.

She had been young and poor and had hung around the resort, working odd jobs as a lift attendant and waitress and feeling an aching hunger when all the rich and successful people came through the resort, like phantoms, but giggling and living and treating her as if she didn't exist, except when it came to taking drink orders or cleaning out a hotel room or helping some forty-ish New York woman who wore a ski outfit that cost more than Patti's clothing budget for the year onto a ski lift.

Then Ted sailed in. He had been charming, and she had fallen under his spell. After only a week of knowing him, she moved in with him.

He was a graduate student, studying law. At night, in their tiny apartment, he would mesmerize Patti with his tales and dreams of being a successful lawyer, then a state representative, and then maybe a congressman . . . who knows? With Ted, anything was possible. He wasn't like the rich phonies who came in and out in seven- or fourteen-day chunks of time; he had a hunger too. A hunger to succeed, to do great things, to be rich and be somebody.

And Grace, breathing softly, asked Patti gingerly, "And you didn't suspect?"

No, of course not, she had replied. Who would? And this was back in the 1970's, before the Internet, before the cable news channels, before the media-driven obsession with serial killers. There had been some stories about women being reported missing around the ski area, but Come on! she protested. This was an innocent time, a time when you were still coasting from the fired-up sixties, when all things seemed possible. Except that the bright and handsome and charming Ted who shared your bed most nights, the Ted who had all these wonderful dreams that he shared with you, this was the same Ted who drove out with his white VW Beetle at night, with handcuffs and wooden club, to stalk and attack young, longhaired women, fracture their skulls, cuff them to his car, and drive off someplace to rape and strangle them.

And then, tired and exhausted, Ted would come home and crawl into bed, laughing and alive, kissing you and kissing you, and you would think all things were possible, indeed, save for the possibility that your man, your Ted, was the one responsible for those chilling lists of disappeared women.

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That's what it had been like, she told Grace, who breathed and nodded in all the right places, as the interview sort of dribbled off as evening progressed. Then Grace got up to leave, and at the door, Grace had gently touched her cheek and said, "You poor, poor, girl," and kissed her full on the lips.

Now she's at the hair shop, Kut & Kurl, in a small strip mall just outside of a town that boasts a pretty downtown and a prep school that is famous around the world for its age and its teaching. Not that Patti has anything against the prep school, but she's sure that the faculty and students there go someplace further up the food chain than Kut & Kurl for their hair needs. And nothing against the ladies who run this place, but good God, let's try for some originality at least, right? How many Kut & Kurls are there in the country? Dozens? Hundreds? She had even worked at a Kut & Kurl near Venice Beach, California, and that had been a blessing for two years—working in such a magical place, with the wide beaches and sunsets and the winters that weren't even winters. A special time, until that awful day, when she had to pack up and move East.

This particular Kut & Kurl is busy this morning, with the old ladies lumbering in, dropped off by sons or daughters or grandchildren. Most of the poor dears didn't have enough hair left to fuss over, but they came to the salon as regular as church. It was a chance to gossip and talk and get out of the house and the painless drone of the televisions. Patti is envious of their steady lives.

The morning goes by fairly fast, with three regular appointments and one walk-in, all male, and she talks just a bit as she works, not overwhelming the men, whom she knows mostly wanted to get a good haircut and then get the hell out. They didn't tip as well as the women, but then again, they didn't need nor demand much, so she is able to churn more of them through than women.

After the walk-in leaves, she goes out for a break as well, just to get out of the salon and the chatter and the soft rock station playing in the background and the smells of the hairspray and chemicals. She sits on a concrete planter, stretches out her legs, and lets the May sun warm her face. As much as possible, she wonders if this was what it meant to be at peace with oneself.

Peace.

Such a wonderful concept.

She looks across the parking lot to the street, and beyond the street, to a small pond rimmed with park benches where she likes to spend her lunch break in warmer weather. She wonders if this

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will be one of those days, if the sun gets high enough and those clouds don't move in and—

A car comes into the parking lot. A dented light blue Ford Escort.

A young woman steps out, hesitant at first. She is in her mid twenties, it looks like, with long, dark brown hair down her back. She has on pressed jeans and a short leather jacket. A camera is slung over her shoulder. She holds a notebook in her hand.

Something heavy starts to press against Patti's chest.

The woman comes over, a shy smile on her face.

The weight gets heavier.

Patti wants to stand up and run, but she can't.

God help her, it's time again.

And her feelings for Ted were mixed, right after he got arrested, as she remembered telling a police detective working on the case.

At first, of course, she believed in his innocence, had to believe in his innocence. The detective had nodded politely and had taken notes in his cluttered office, and she had gone on saying, you don't understand, and when he just grunted a reply, she had kept quiet. For it was hard to say that she had to believe in Ted's innocence in order to believe in herself. For how could it have been otherwise? How could a woman be so dumb and dopey to live with a man who was accused of being one of the worst serial killers in the United States? Who had supposedly started his dark arts back in Washington State?

So she had kept the faith.

Even when the newspapers started reporting stories about what Ted did in Seattle.

Even when the newspapers started reporting stories about what Ted was suspected to have done in Colorado and Utah.

And even when she appeared at a court hearing, crowded up front along with the other spectators, she wanted to let Ted know that she was there, that she supported him, and that she wanted to talk to him. But it never happened. Not once. His lawyer refused to let her see him, and even after he had interviewed her, over and over again—trying to set up alibis for Ted, she was no dummy—she never got a chance again to talk to Ted face to face.

Only once did she ever catch his eye.

At one of the court hearings, when it was clear that the evidence against Ted was mounting, Ted looked back from his conference table with his lawyer, to look at the crowd of spectators look upon him, and she caught his eye. Patti and Ted. Looking at each other. His look was . . . it was cold. Unyielding. Emotionless. And then he looked away.

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She had stumbled out of the courtroom and puked in the hallway outside, knowing that for a fair number of women, that expression on that man's face had been the last thing they had ever seen.

So in New Hampshire, the young lady is now upon her. She looks over at the hair salon and then at Patti, and she says, "Excuse me?"

"Yes?" Patti is amazed at how hard it is to hear her own voice.

"This . . . this is where Patti Barnes works, am I right?"

What to do, what to do, what to do. Deny all you want, she thinks, and this young girl—yes, Patti knows it's not PC but she can't help herself, she is just a girl—will keep on sniffing around and around. By now she knows reporters, knows how they work. Knows how tireless and ruthless they can be when they feel like they're being snowed. Better to end it now, she feels.

"Yes," she says. "And I'm Patti Barnes."

A quick, nervous nod. "My name is Beth Hanley. I'm a reporter for the *Sentinel*. I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions."

She tries a smile, knows it's not much of a smile. "Questions? About what?"

The reporter looks down to her open notebook, like she's embarrassed to look Patti in the face. "I'd like to do a story about you."

"Me? Why?"

The face is still down. "I . . . I understand that years ago, you used to date Ted Bundy. The serial killer. Is that true?"

The heavy sensation in her chest increases.

"Yes," Patti finally says. "Yes, it's true."

Reporters.

When they were finished interviewing detectives, police officers, district attorneys, the judge, neighbors, and everybody else, they fell upon her, like a horde of locusts descending upon a solitary cornstalk. They followed her from her apartment to the police station, from her apartment to the courthouse, from her apartment to anywhere else.

At the very first, because it felt like the polite thing to do, she did talk to the reporters, but they were insatiable. Over and over again, the very same questions:

What was Ted like?

Did you ever suspect he was a killer?

Were you ever afraid?

And most of the reporters were men, tall men, short men, bearded

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and clean-shaven men. Some dressed in suits, others in jeans and dress shirts with neckties. All with their little notebooks or cameras, or tape recorders and microphones, all pushing and prodding and trying to drag out one little bit of information that no one else had gotten yet. It was as if they were incessant suitors, demanding to know if any previous suitor had gotten to "first base," and couldn't she go just a little bit further this time, please, please, Miss Barnes. We'll never tell anyone; your secret will be safe with us.

There were always the unasked questions from the men, as well, questions she knew that they wanted to know:

How was Ted in bed?

Why did you think he hooked up with you?

And . . .

Honey, no offense, but why didn't he rape and murder you as well?

Well?

Well?

So just before Ted was going to trial, it had proven to be too much, so she had fled home to Mom, back to the same trailer in the same park, the same wind whipping down from the mountains. Mom had put on thirty pounds since she had last seen her, had picked up another pack of Marlboro Lights in her daily habit, and after Patti settled back in, Mom came right out and said it: there was a lawyer friend of hers, a nice fellow who had helped probate Dad's will and who had come to her with a powerful suggestion: there was money to be made, good money, if she just came out and told the real story behind the story. Now was the time, when the interest was there, and—

Patti had changed the subject. She looked at her mother, saying, Mom, please. I just want to get away from it for a while. All right? Away from everything. Here. I just want to be home. I just want to be your girl for a few nights. I have some money saved up. I can pay some room and board.

Crying then, she had said, Mom, please take care of me for a while. All right?

And Mom had been a bit cool, saying that her lawyer friend was trying to do the right thing, that's all, but it was Patti's life now, and if that's what she wanted, and Mom talked like that as Patti washed and dried the dinner dishes, and that had been that.

A week or so later, after playing gin rummy with Mom and having one Budweiser too many, she had let it all go to her, her fears and memories and what it had been like, living with Ted and then seeing the police there, saying Ted was under arrest for kidnapping, was a suspect in a number of homicides, and would she please come along and talk to them.

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All night long, it seemed, she had unburdened herself to Mom, even telling her that little secret of what she had called herself when she found out.

Mom, she said, it was like I was the Devil's girlfriend. You know?

The damn Devil's girlfriend.

And Mom had reached over and touched her wrist.

You poor girl, you poor, poor girl.

Then a month later. Standing in a supermarket checkout line in Randolph, scanning a tabloid magazine, she saw, on the bright paper cover, a picture of Ted and a picture of her. Patti Barnes. Taken during one of Ted's court appearances, when she had walked down the courthouse steps. The screaming headline:

I WAS THE DEVIL'S GIRLFRIEND.

Hands shaking, she picked up the tabloid, opened it up. Saw the words she had told her mother, all the words that night, printed in black type upon white paper. Her secret words, told to her mother.

Right there.

She had walked away from the checkout counter, leaving behind the groceries, and went back to the trailer. Mom wasn't there—she was working as a secretary at Denver First Savings' downtown branch—so Patti had packed a bag and left.

She never talked to her mother, ever again.

The reporter is bright but not knowledgeable. Patti is sitting next to her on a bench right by the pond, across the street from Kut & Kurl. Her shift is now over and again, a part of her wonders why she agrees to talk to this young girl. What in God's name could this girl know that would make any sense, any sense at all?

One of the first things Patti asks is, "How did you find me?"

"A tip." There's a shrug of her shoulders. "Somebody called in, said they recognized your face from a book written some years back. About Ted Bundy. The caller said Bundy's girlfriend was working in town, at the Kut & Kurl."

Patti is sure her face is flushed. "This helpful tipster. Man or woman?"

"Woman. But she didn't leave her name."

Patti folds her arms. "Of course not."

The young girl flips a page in her notebook. "Ted Bundy was one of the world's most famous mass murderers," she starts, and Patti cuts her off right there.

"Sorry, dear, you don't know what you're talking about."

"Excuse me?"

Patti says, "Ted wasn't a mass murderer."

"He wasn't? I mean, the numbers show that—"

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"Ted wasn't a mass murderer," she presses on. "A mass murderer is someone who kills a lot of people all at once. Like those high school boys who shot up their school in Colorado. Or the loser who goes into a fast food restaurant and starts shooting up the place. That's a mass murderer. Understand?"

The pen scribbles some more.

"Ted was a serial killer," she says. "There's a difference. A mass murderer usually acts out in a rage. Something triggers him, something inside him just snaps. He lets loose with his rage, all at once. And mass murderers . . . they usually end up dead. From cops or from suicide.

"But Ted was different. Ted was someone who killed over time. He had a . . . a craving. A fetish. Something that he wanted to do, month after month, year after year. A mass murderer will mostly kill whoever is there. But not Ted. Ted was a seducer. Ted was a hunter. He liked a particular kind of woman, and for the most part, that's the type of woman he went after. And mass murderers, usually they're stupid. But not Ted. He was smart. Quite smart."

Scribble, scribble, scribble. And then the reporter looks up.

"I'm . . . I'm sorry to say this, but from what you said . . ."

"Yes?" she asks.

"It almost seems like you're proud of him."

Pride. There's a thought.

Had she ever been proud of her boyfriend, the serial killer?

Once, and only once.

It was in Colorado, and Ted was getting ready for trial, right after being convicted for kidnapping, for having picked up a young woman who had been strong enough to fight back after finding herself in the VW. There had been hearings and lots of publicity and protests and Ted had continued to deny that he had anything to do with the murders of the young women in Colorado or Washington or Utah. The police and the prosecutors had been so sure of what they had accomplished, and how smart they had been to have captured the nation's most notorious criminal.

And one day, he escaped.

Just like that.

Gone. Made a hole in the ceiling of his cell, crawled through the courthouse building, and got out.

And she had this little shiver of excitement that Ted was loose, was out there, on the run, free from whatever bonds were holding him back, and she was surprised at how unfearful she was. For Ted had never hurt her, had never threatened her, and had only

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promised love and affection and adventure. By then she was tired of all the official attention from the police and the courts and the reporters, most of them men, of course, and so yes, there was a sort of pride that Ted had outsmarted them all. It made the men a little less cocky, a little less confident, and she was pleased at how she felt.

Pride. Sure, there had been pride.

Until Ted ended up in Florida and bloodily slaughtered two college girls slumbering in their sorority house late one night.

The reporter asks all the right questions, yet Patti feels like the young girl is going through the motions, like she's not sure what the big fuss is all about. After all, compared to what in hell was going on in the world today, Ted Bundy could now probably be considered a rank amateur. Have his own damn reality TV show or something.

She says, "Why did it take so long?"

"Why did what take so long?"

"To catch him. I mean, it sounds like he got caught because he made a few mistakes. Why did it take so long for the police to catch him?"

Patti shrugs. "It's a huge country. And if a serial killer works in small towns, how often do the cops there communicate with other cops? Even if the cases are similar?"

The reporter scribbles away. Patti says, "Plus, he was just a bit sloppy. He killed a number of victims within a certain area. Imagine how many more he could have killed if he had just killed one woman, and then moved to another state, and so forth and so on. He could have killed scores more."

The reporter looks up from her notebook and says, "Can I ask you a few personal questions?"

Patti sighs. "I guess so."

She says, "Do you have any children?"

"No."

"Ever been married?"

"Nope."

"And why is that?" the reporter asks.

The answer is, of course, something she cannot reveal.

After Ted's arrest in Florida for the murders of the sorority girls, Patti moved to Taos, New Mexico, because of an article she had read in an old *National Geographic* magazine while waiting in the dentist's office. The pictures of the Spanish homes and crisp mountain ranges and blue-washed sky had always stayed with her.

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Taos was a wonderful city, large enough to lose yourself in, small enough to feel comfy and not alone at all. The mountains reminded her enough of Colorado, and after a number of months, she found a job as a hairdresser. God, that had been a good time, an innocent time almost, far away from her mother and the thoughts of Ted, about to be executed by the State of Florida.

By now she was in her mid twenties, feeling good about having left Colorado and all that crap back there, the stories about Ted, the questions from all the men in journalism, law enforcement, and law offices. She started exercising; there was nothing she loved better than getting up in the morning under the cool desert sky and jogging a mile or two before showering and going to work at Top Cuts. Yeah, that had been the name. Top Cuts.

It was in Taos that she met Randy Phinney, a bronzed man about five years older than her, who worked construction. Thin black mustache and a sharp, barking laugh that attracted her for some reason. She had trimmed his hair a few times before he came right out and asked her out, and she blurted yes before really thinking about what was going on. He was the opposite of Ted: muscular, outdoorsy, and if he had read a book since leaving high school, he sure liked keeping it a secret.

He took her to roadhouses outside of Taos, danced with her to twangy country music that comforted her. She tried horseback riding for the first time in her life—and God, the bruises along her inner thighs took weeks to heal—and weekend camping trips, tents, and sleeping bags tossed in the rear of his Jeep, camping out under the night sky, the stars so bright it almost hurt her eyes to stare at them.

Then one night she went to his rented house, out in a lonely part of Taos, and he was drunk. She had seen Randy with a few beers in him before, but nothing like this. That night she felt something when she came into the cluttered living room—like the heavy air one feels just before a thunderstorm breaks out.

Randy stood there, weaving, like his feet couldn't quite lay flat on the flooring. His eyes were sharp and there was a rolled-up newspaper in his hand.

She stood there, knowing what was going to happen next. Knew that eventually, something like this was going to happen.

"What's up?" she asked.

"This," he said, thrusting the rolled-up newspaper at her. She took it in her hand, unrolled it. There was the picture of Ted at his trial in Florida, looking snappy with a grin and a bowtie. Next, horrifyingly black and white, the "real death" photo the tabloid promised, showing Ted with his head shaved, skin gray, after his

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electrocution. And there, even worse, was her own photo. Mystery girlfriend still missing. She looked at the story. Written by a man.

She looked up at Randy. "I was going to tell you, it's just that—"

He strode right up to her, face inches away, and she smelled the stale scent of beer. "Bitch," he said. "You, you were with that killer. That bastard. . . . What was it like, huh? What was it like?"

She turned to get out of there, when Randy grabbed her arm. She yelped. He spun her around and said, "Damn it, what was it like? What was it like to be with a killer? Huh?"

"Randy, you're hurting me," she said. "Let me go, I'll—"

So it happened.

Like destiny or some damn thing.

He slapped her once, then again, and part of her said, Was this what it was like, for the other women? To know that some man has now grabbed hold of you, some man with murder in his heart, and that there would be no happy ending, no last-minute rescue, just the terror and fear and pain, ratcheting up, higher and higher . . .

Another slap. Randy was cursing now, and with both of his strong hands, he dragged her by her arms into the bedroom, where the night progressed, through the slaps, the taunting voice, again and again.

"What was it like?"

"Was he good?"

"Am I any better? Huh?"

"Did he teach you anything? Huh?"

Through that long, dark night, she finally learned it all.

The reporter closes her notebook, steps up, and almost as an afterthought, she takes Patti's photograph with a small digital camera, Patti sitting alone on the park bench, her hands folded primly across her lap. She sits there as the sun slowly sets, the air becomes cooler, and only when a full bladder demands some attention, does she finally get up and walk away.

After that night with Randy Phinney in Taos, she spent a half day in the shower, and then drove out without a word, without a forwarding address, without much of anything, damn it. She drove west until she ran out of land and ended up at the Pacific Ocean, in a small town just north of San Diego. Another hair salon, another apartment, and the whole cycle started up again, after months of peace and pleasure, when a certain man came into her life and dated her and kissed her and said he loved her, right up to the point when he found out. The the same questions:

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"What was it like?"
"How was he?"
"What did you learn from Ted?"

It takes only two days for the *Sentinel* article to come out, and the first time she walks into the Kut & Kurl, she almost weeps with relief from what the other women there do to her. One by one, they come over to squeeze her hand and touch her face and whisper good wishes to her.

Then, like she expects, the men show up.

They're quiet at first, shy, sitting in the chairs by the door, looking like ten-year-old boys standing against the wall in the gymnasium at their very first school dance. They stare at their shoes or out the windows, but one by one, they request her for their haircuts. She knows what's going on behind those shy expressions. They are curious. They want to know. They want to know what it's like and how it happened, and being with someone who talked to Ted and lived with Ted and loved with Ted, well, it's the next best thing to being there, right?

She trims their hair and beards and mustaches, quickly and efficiently, all the while knowing that it's happening again.

Oh yes, again and again.

From small town to bigger town to city. Her story gets out and the men come by and eventually one man captures her interest, one man who wants to know everything, and she finds herself succumbing, again and again.

His name is Peter Wickland, about forty years old, old enough to know about Ted and his bloody years of work, but young enough so that he doesn't know all of the story. He's stocky but well built, dressed in clean jeans and buttoned dress shirt. He has a close-trimmed beard and nice, thick brown hair. She finds herself enjoying the feel of his hair through her fingers as she works it. He's a freelance investment counselor, working out of his home at the beach, and after his fourth visit to the Kut & Kurl—about four months after the *Sentinel* article appeared—he asks her out.

And she says yes.

The first date is just lunch at a restaurant in town, nothing fancy, just a quiet meal and some laughs and then a walk along the park by the river. As they leave the park, Peter says, "I've got two things to say to you."

"Sure," she says.

"The first is, I'd like to see you again."

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She smiles. It has gone well. "That'd be nice. What's the second thing?"

He smiles back at her. "I don't care about the newspaper article, about what happened to you. If you want to tell me, fine. But I won't ask you."

She leans forward, kisses him on the cheek, and forgives him on the spot for lying to her.

For among other things, that's what she has gained over the years, that no matter how many times the men who have come into her life say they're not curious at all about Ted Bundy, they really do always want to know. Honest to God, that's all these men cared about was her time with the nation's most famous serial killer. Men, men, men, it seems all they care about is the blood and the gore and the terror that those women, her poor sisters, went through, and what, if anything, she can tell them to let them in on what had really happened.

And to a man, they were always disappointed.

For a while, it seems like Peter might be the exception, might finally be the one who is different, but like all the others, it comes down to those few months she spent with Ted in Colorado.

After five dates and some kissing and squeezing, she has invited him over to her place for dinner, and she notes the little grimace as he comes into the living room and notices the plastic slipcover on the couch.

She says, "I just like to keep things clean, that's all."

"Oh, it's okay hon," he says, sitting down. "Just reminds me a bit of my grandma's place. No offense."

"None taken."

She sits next to him and he starts talking about the upcoming weekend and what movie they might see, while she caresses his shoulder, and he smiles and leans over and the kiss and the room gets warmer, and he breaks away and says, "Is it safe?"

"Safe? Safe for what?"

That funny little smile. "Safe to go on. I've felt . . . a bit of tension, that there was a line I couldn't cross. Patti, I want to kiss you and kiss you and keep on going, and you just seem . . . reluctant."

She says nothing.

"Is it . . . is it because of Bundy? Is that it?"

So, another promise broken.

"Yes, yes it is," she says.

"Dear heart," he says, grasping her hand. "You've got to let it go . . . let the past go. Don't let that evil bastard rule your life."

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Surprisingly enough, tears come to her eyes. "It's hard. It's so very hard."

His voice is reassuring but the words strike home. "You can trust me," he says. "Tell me everything that happened back there. Everything. I trust you. Honestly, I can help you. I know I can."

She looks at that smiling face, the beard that she had trimmed, the hair she had cut back and caressed, and she kisses him and says, "You really want to help?"

"Yes, yes I do."

"You want to know what it was like? What I did back then?"

"Of course. But only to help."

Sure, she thinks. Only to help.

"I bet you want to know what I learned, don't you."

A squeeze of her hand is the only answer he offers.

Another kiss, and she leans back and smiles and starts unbuttoning her blouse. "You stay right here, tiger. And I'll be back after getting ready."

"Ready for what?"

Another button unbuttoned, and then another. "Just you wait."

His smile is brighter. "You've got it, Patti."

She leaves the room, her legs trembling.

And on those long nights, staying in hotel rooms, she has wondered how it has all come to this. The long travels, the attempts to set up a peaceful and quiet existence, and then the need begins, the quiet urge that grows stronger and stronger. The hunger. The yearning. That burning feeling.

A feeling that can't be ignored, until she goes to the phone book and finds a certain phone number, in each community she has lived in, and makes a quiet and unbidden phone call.

Every single time.

So now she is in the bathroom, disrobing. The blouse and slacks come off, and then the bra and the panties, until she is standing there, nude, looking at herself in the mirror. She briefly runs her hands across her skin, feeling its smoothness, feeling the muscles underneath it, the muscles from all those years of working out to make her strong and fit. No Ted was ever going to seduce her, ever again. And no Ted would ever try to harm her. She would never allow herself to be so vulnerable. Never again.

What did you learn, the men always asked. What did you learn?

And she remembered one man, Tom, up near Sun Valley, who asked perhaps the strangest question of them all: Love, he asked, did you learn how to love from Ted?

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That thought brings a smile that she observes in the mirror.

For what she learned from Ted wasn't love, but it was hate. Hate indeed. A hatred so long and so deep that she has carried it with her from town to town, city to city, like some cherished possession. One man, one town, one state at a time. And never to be caught.

A voice from the other side of the cottage. "You okay in there?"

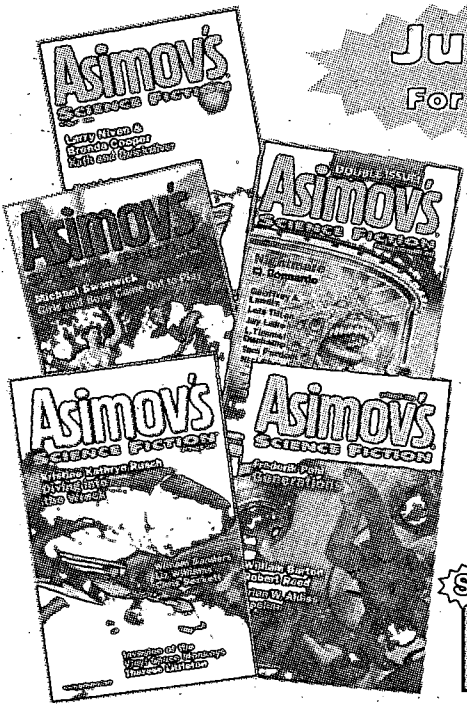
She looks at her nude figure again in the mirror, and then strolls out.

"Coming, Peter!" she calls out, and as she walks to her new boyfriend, sitting patiently on the plastic slipcovered couch, she reaches into the breezeway leading outside and lovingly, gingerly, picks up the sharp axe from next to the woodpile.

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JUST WATCHING

It was a pretty house with a nice porch along the front and big white windows along one side of the door. I looked in while Miss Ascot rang the bell. The woman was on the telephone. I leaned against the window and listened.

"That must be the social worker now, Edna. I've got to go. Yes, I'm a little nervous, but lots of people do it. So I'm willing to take a chance."

Miss Ascot put her finger on the button that rang the chimes again. They sounded nice. I like chimes.

"Yes, I'll call you later and give you the word," she laughed. "I'll be worse off than she is if I have to spend another day with the children and no help. Bye, Edna." She put the telephone down and came toward the door. I thought she was the prettiest lady I had ever seen.

"Miss Ascot. Come in." She smiled and opened the screen door. She hadn't looked at me. It almost seemed as though she kept her eyes away on purpose. Like she was afraid to look.

"This is Julia, Mrs. Kent. Julia, this is Mrs. Kent and she will be your new mistress. I'm sure that you and she will get along just fine. Particularly if you try your best to do everything Mrs. Kent tells you."

I saw it then—in the corner of the living room. It was a big one, but its glass face was dark. I walked over to it and put my hand on its shiny wooden top.

"Julia!" Mrs. Ascot's voice followed me. "Mrs. Kent was talking to you." She lowered her voice a little, almost as though I couldn't hear if she spoke below a shout. "She loves television. We got one at the institute and she did nothing else from morning to night but sit in front of it. We found we just had to be very firm. Outside of that one little fault I'm sure you'll find Julia an excellent worker."

My hand strayed across the cabinet, down toward the knobs. It was real mahogany.

"Yes, I'm sure I shall." Mrs. Kent made her voice sound like Miss

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Hank Blaustein

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Ascot's. "You said anyone I got would be—well, we understand. Does she have any peculiar habits?"

Miss Ascot's voice sounded like ice cream tasted. "Julia is really quite bright, Mrs. Kent. We're awfully pleased with her progress at the institute. She has been a star pupil. If anything goes wrong, you can reach me at this number. Now, perhaps, you'd like her to meet the children and then we'll show her to her room."

They walked off toward a big wide door that opened on a garden and I reached out my hand. I had carefully studied the knobs. I turned the one marked volume way down. Perhaps if they couldn't hear . . .

It was cartoons. Crazy Cat. One I'd never seen. But Miss Ascot's voice, followed by Miss Ascot, came across the room. She made the set black and she said, "Julia, you and Mrs. Kent will make arrangements about your leisure time. Until you have a schedule, you are not to watch TV. Now then, these are the children." They were brown and strong-looking. Their names were Michael, the biggest; Gladys, next; and Frederick, the baby. They all had round blue eyes. Their mother's eyes were brown. I wondered about their round blue eyes.

Mrs. Kent told the children to run along and then she took us up the back stairs. We went into a pretty little room with a low, slanted ceiling on the third floor. It was pink and the curtains were flowered. The bedspread was flowered, too. It matched the curtains.

"Thank you, Mrs. Kent." I smiled at her. "It's a very pretty room. I like it."

She smiled back. Her eyes, as I said were brown, and her hair was red. It was long and pulled back with a jewelled clip around it. It hung down, below the clip. Her face was shaped like a heart and her mouth was red, too. She was so very pretty, I thought. I was going to like her very much.

Miss Ascot set my suitcase down. "You unpack, Julia," she said, "and then come down and I'll say good-bye to you."

I was looking in the neat, clean dresser drawers when they shut the door. The drawers had flowered wall paper covering their bottoms.

"It's just that she's a bit childlike. An injury to her brain when she was young. We've trained her and are prepared to vouch for her. She is perfectly capable of earning her living. But it's people like yourself, who are willing to take the Julias into their homes, who help the most. Home-life is what they need."

Mrs. Kent answered but they were so far away by then that I couldn't hear them.

I started to put my things in separate drawers, but they looked

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so lonesome that I put them all in one drawer like I did at the institute. Then I went downstairs.

There was a man with Mrs. Kent and Miss Ascot. He was a big man with grey and black hair that waved on his head and round blue eyes. He looked like if you poked him the air would come out.

"This is Mr. Kent, Julia," said Miss Ascot and he shook my hand. His hand was damp. I wiped mine on the side of my skirt. I tried not to let anyone see, but he saw me. I knew because his big round eyes flattened out, just for a minute, to long slits.

"Now, Julia," Miss Ascot put out her hand. Her hand was dry and kind of rough. It was square, like Miss Ascot. It was an easy hand to shake. "I explained about your salary and your afternoon off. Remember, you're to be back by nine on your afternoon off."

I nodded. She had told me a dozen times. I sometimes thought Miss Ascot was a little simple, the way she kept repeating things.

They all said good-bye then and I watched Miss Ascot disappear through the door, heard her go down the steps. I looked at the clock. Almost four. Time for *Your Movie Theatre.* I looked hopefully at the television set, but its face was blank.

Mrs. Kent gave a nervous little laugh. "Good heavens," she said, "it's almost four. I suppose we had better think about dinner, Julia."

Mr. Kent yawned and started for the stairs. "Guess I'll catch forty winks. Call me when dinner's ready."

Mrs. Kent took me to the kitchen. "Is Mr. Kent out of work?" I asked when she had given me potatoes to peel.

She looked up, startled. "Out of work? Oh—because he's home in the daytime?" She laughed. She was such a pretty lady. "Paul is a newspaperman. He works at night. He's what you call a reviewer. That is, he tells people whether a picture or a play or a TV show is good."

I looked with pleasure on my nicely peeled potatoes. "But how does he know?"

She sounded like she was trying not to laugh. "He gives the readers his opinion."

I started to ask if he got paid for it, but I looked around the shiny kitchen and decided he must. I made a note in my head to ask him about it. That was the kind of job I'd like. Watching television—and getting paid for it.

Dinner went all right and we got the children to bed. Mrs. Kent sighed then and walked heavily down the stairs. I followed her.

"Julia, you can go to bed now if you like. Mr. Kent went to the theatre this evening and I'm going to turn in early myself. I'm dead."

I wanted to ask if I could watch the *Buzzy Bisby Show,* but I was afraid to—on the first night—so I went up to the third floor.

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I listened carefully and when Mrs. Kent had gone to bed I sneaked back down. Keeping the volume low I watched clear through Steve Allen. It was wonderful!

I found this method worked very well. I heard Mrs. Kent tell Miss Ascot on the phone that I was very willing. "No, she hasn't pestered me about the TV at all. She said *Howdy Doody* was her favorite program and the children usually watch it anyway so she has permission to see that. So all things considered, everything is fine."

Just fine. I knew I was going to like it there. No one paid much attention to me, except Mrs. Kent. And every night—the television.

But then Mr. Kent began to stay home every evening.

He stayed home in the living room. He had bottles of things in there and he lay on the sofa and drank from them. He never even watched the television at all.

I stood it for three nights. Then I went down. I wore my best dress like a party and I brushed my hair very carefully. It is pretty hair when it's brushed. It looks like yellow cotton candy.

Mr. Kent was lying on the sofa, his eyes shut. He hadn't shaved. His face looked dark and scratchy. He was breathing hard. A glass was on the floor beside him.

"Mr. Kent."

He opened his eyes. He had to look for me before he saw me.

"If it wouldn't annoy you, Mr. Kent, could I turn on the set? I'll keep it low and not bother you at all."

"Good God," he said, rubbing a hand across his eyes. "Get the hell out of here. Can't a man have a little peace in his own home?"

I looked at the set. It was a shame. Nobody enjoying it. Nobody at all. I turned to go.

"Just a minute." He sat up and his round eyes looked glittery. "Maybe you can stay. Nobody else will keep me company. She goes up to her chaste and virginal bed." He swallowed the rest of the drink in his glass. "Just because a man gets fired—hell, it was no job anyway. The novel, that's what I'll do. I'll write the novel. Sit down, Julia. Here—have a drink."

I looked at the bottle. The brown stuff in it did not look as though it would taste good. But, perhaps if I went along with him, he would turn the set on.

He poured a drink for me. I was right. It did not taste good but I drank it. He was talking about a lot of things I didn't understand like "cold-hearted bitch" and "nobody realizes that I've got talent." During this time he had two more drinks and I began to get nervous. It was almost time for Steve Allen. We might miss it.

"Come here, Julia," he said suddenly, patting the sofa cushion

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beside him. I put my glass down and went over. My head felt funny.

I stood next to him and he pulled me down beside him. "You may be sub-normal, but you've got an above-average shape." He put his arm around my shoulders. "What do you think about, Julia? What do you think of us?"

I found his arm was heavy. I couldn't sit up straight so I leaned back and he moved closer.

"I'm happy here, Mr. Kent. This is the first time I've lived in a home. Mrs. Kent is good to me."

His round face floated over mine. "Mrs. Kent is good to nobody. Not unless they've got something she wants. Then she's as sweet as honey. You wouldn't be that way, would you, Julia?"

His other arm moved on my shoulder, down.

"Mr. Kent." I tried to sit up.

"What do you want, Julia?"

"Mr. Kent. The television?"

"Sure," he said. "In a minute."

It didn't take long. Then, like he promised, he got up and turned the set on. The blackness went and exciting people came and went, singing, laughing, dancing. It was wonderful—as always. I forgot Mr. Kent.

And so it was all right again. I could come down freely. Mr. Kent was most always there. But it didn't matter. We understood each other.

At night, with the television, I felt as though this house were mine.

But one night Mrs. Kent came down the stairs. Mr. Kent had sent me into the kitchen for a fresh bucket of ice. I heard her voice and waited in the entry, behind the swinging door.

"Paul—I thought I heard someone talking. What are you doing down here?"

He answered loudly. I think he wanted me to hear. "The TV. Just watching the TV."

"Oh. Hadn't you better go to bed? You've been drinking again. That isn't helping you find a job, or write that book you keep talking about either."

I heard him move. His voice got thick, like it was sometimes when he was with me on the sofa.

"Can I sleep in your room, Karen?"

"No. Not tonight. You know I can't abide the smell of liquor."

"No—you can't, can you?" He stomped angrily across the room and I heard a click as he turned the television off. "In fact, you can't really abide me, can you, Karen?"

"Not very often, Paul." Her voice cracked like ice on the river.

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I heard the loud sound and I pushed open the door to look. He had hit her and she fell as I watched, slowly, like a slow motion scene in an old movie. Her head made a funny noise against the bricks of the fireplace. We'd had watermelon once at the institute and somebody dropped one. It sounded like Mrs. Kent's head did when it hit. *Splonk.*

He drew back, his mouth open, but making no sound. He leaned down over her and raised up. He looked around and I was careful to keep out of sight. He took a long taste from the bottle. Then he took hold of her feet and pulled her behind the sofa next to the wall. He pushed the sofa back over her. He went to the bathroom and brought a wet towel. He wiped the bricks. He took the towel away.

I was in the living room when he came back. The ice was on the table. I was turning the television set on.

He put his hand on mine and turned it off.

"How would you like a little vacation, Julia. A couple of weeks at the beach? In the city? Anywhere, anywhere at all."

I kept my eyes down and my hands clasped lady-like behind me.

"I don't think Miss Ascot would let me go."

"Damn Miss Ascot." Little beads of sweat stood out on his brow. He was thinking, hard. It was like watching a play—he was looking for a way out.

I poured him a drink. "Here, Mr. Kent. You don't look so good. This will make you feel better."

His hand went around the cold glass. His round blue eyes looked at me and suddenly they became flat and narrow.

The phone rang and he answered it. He talked for a while out in the hall and then came back. He didn't know I went to the kitchen. He raised the glass to his lips; I knew Mr. Kent had found a way out.

He's lying beside her now. I found the package high on a kitchen shelf where Mrs. Kent had told me to put it, away from the children. Rat poisoning, it said, with a red skull and crossbones. While Mr. Kent was out at the phone I put it into the whiskey.

He knew, I think, right away but he'd taken a huge swallow the way he always did and it was too late. It didn't take long after that. It was easy, even for me, to see Mr. Kent's only way out. Blame it on the hired girl. I'd seen that done on television at least a dozen times.

I wiped off fingerprints and put glasses in their hands—just long enough to leave their marks.

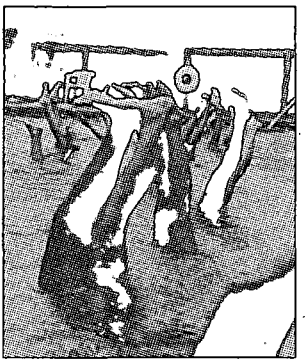
As soon as Steve Allen is over, I'll go to bed.

Somebody will find them by morning. I hope the next house I go to has color. Twenty-four inch.

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The Story That Won

The July/August Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Sandra Woelfl Paulson of Oak Creek, Wisconsin. Honorable mentions go to James A. Knoop of Clay, Michigan; J. F. Peirce of Bryan, Texas; Rick Deal of Hickory, North Carolina; Gigi Vernon of Freeville, New York; J. Patrick Alsop of Charlotte, North Carolina; Todd Outcalt of Brownsburg, Indiana; Thomas Polick of Chicago, Illinois; Rudy Uribe, Jr. of Valley Glen, California; and Pamela Karavolos of Rosamond, California.



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Forgettable

SANDRA WOELFL PAULSON

"Please step inside the room for questioning, miss." It was just standard procedure. My name was on the list. I shared homeroom with THEM during the school year. I wasn't nervous. Don't mistunderstand me; I was guilty, but I wouldn't be caught. It started on Monday morning. My calloused hands vigorously scraped gum off the bottom of the bleachers. THEY had fun synchronized swimming during summer vacation. I didn't. I also didn't wear designer clothes or drive a BMW. I was unnoticable.

"Hey, what's-your-name, I ain't paying you to stare at those girls. Get back to work!" I was even forgettable to my boss, but I needed the money, and he paid cash; no paperwork.

I went to the locker room to wash up before lunch. "Excuse me!" one of THEM said as I almost bumped into HER. "Only students are allowed in here!" SHE stated, pounding HER foot and pointing toward the exit.

"You've got to be kidding!" I thought. That's when I lost it. See, on Mondays, I cleaned the pool. That Monday, I put something other than cleaner in the pool. The next day when THEY flipped upside down, well, I think you get the picture.

I told the cops my story: I knew nothing. "Thank you, ummm, miss. You're dismissed," the cop stated as he fumbled through the paperwork. Everyone assumed it was that girl who cleaned the pool last night. There was only one problem. No one remembered who she was.

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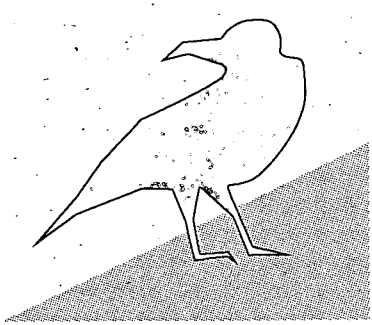
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